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A

FREE ADDRESS

TO

Proteſtant Diſſenters,

On the SUBJECT of

CHURCH DISCIPLINE;

WITH

A Preliminary Diſcourſe, concerning the SPIRIT OF CHRISTIANITY, and the Corruption of it by falſe Notions of Religion.

BY JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, LL. D. F. R. S.

Be watchful, and ſtrengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die.

JESUS.

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A Preliminary Discourse concerning the SPIRIT OF CHRISTIANITY,

And the Corruption of it by falſe Notions of Religion.

EVERY [illegible] ſerious ſentiments muſt [illegible] influence upon the mind, and [illegible] produce a particular temper and caſt of thought, which will greatly influence the conduct. Chriſtianity is by no means an exception to this general obſervation. Its effect upon the diſpoſition of mind is peculiar to itſelf, and except we feel as chriſtians, we cannot act as ſuch.

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 inſpired

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And the Corruption of it by falſe Notions of Religion.

EVERY ſet of religious ſentiments muſt have its influence upon the mind, and will produce a particular temper and caſt of thought, which will greatly influence the conduct. Chriſtianity is by no means an exception to this general obſervation. Its effect upon the diſpoſition of mind is peculiar to itſelf, and except we *feel* as chriſtians, we cannot *act* as ſuch.

Nothing can be conceived more excellent than the temper of mind that was

inſpired by genuine chriſtianity, as it appears in the life of our Saviour, his apoſtles, and the primitive chriſtians. It was that temper that could only be inſpired by the worthieſt notions of the divine being, as righteous, good, and merciful; attentive to the intereſt of all his creatures, and acceſſible to them. It was ſuch a temper of mind, as naturally aroſe from the moſt favourable views of mankind, as our brethren, the offspring of the ſame almighty parent, the ſubjects of his moral government, the objects of his love, and partakers of the common ſalvation by Jeſus Chriſt. At the ſame time, the proſpect that chriſtianity opened to them of a future life, gave them a juſt ſuperiority of mind to this world; and thereby took off the influence of whatever might obſtruct the growth of their piety towards God, and benevolence towards man.

But falſe and unworthy notions of God and of his moral government, and alſo of the whole chriſtian ſcheme, too ſoon crept into the church; and the ſpirit and temper

temper of chriſtianity was debaſed in the ſame proportion.

This corruption began by the mixture of the *Oriental*, or more properly, of the *Indian philoſophy*, which was pretty much the ſame as we now find it in the religion of Indoſtan. This is, probably, the moſt antient of all the ſyſtems of heathen mythology that we are acquainted with, and was the ſource of a great part of that of the Egyptians and Greeks. It was a fundamental principle in this philoſophy, that, ſince the world contains ſo great a mixture of evil, the ſupreme being, who is perfectly good, was not himſelf the maker of it; but that it was the production of another being, either independent of him, or derived from him. It was alſo another great principle of this philoſophy, that all human ſouls were *lapſed beings*, of a ſuperior order, which had exiſted in ſome former ſtate; and it was probably an attempt to connect chriſtianity with theſe hypotheſies, that firſt ſuggeſted the idea of Jeſus Chriſt having been a pre-exiſtent

ſuperangelic ſpirit, the creator and governor of this world; contrary to the expreſs doctrine of the Old Teſtament, which gives us no idea of any other creator of the heavens and earth, beſides the one only living and true God. Having got this hypotheſis, they were eaſily led into a miſtaken interpretation of ſome paſſages of the Old Teſtament, and ſuppoſed, that when God is there ſaid to have created the world by his *word* (λογος) another *agent* was meant, and not the mere *power*, or *energy* of God himſelf; though the apoſtle John ſeems to have intended expreſly to contradict and refute that notion, by aſſerting, in the introduction to his goſpel, that what is called λογος or *the word*, was *God* himſelf, and not a being diſtinct from him. When, however, by means ~~by~~ this philoſophy, the ſupreme being was made to diſappear, and to withdraw himſelf from the affairs of men, a conſiderable change could not but take place in our ideas of his attributes and character, and conſequently in the diſpoſition of our minds with reſpect to him.

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The Athanaſian doctrine of the trinity giving men more objects of divine homage than one, *variety*, and conſequently *imperfection* was neceſſarily introduced into their ideas of God. It was impoſſible for the mind of man to conceive of *three* beings, or perſons, as exactly alike; and, indeed, the purpoſe of the ſcheme would not admit of it. That union, therefore, of venerable and amiable attributes, that had before been referred to *one object*, could no longer exiſt; and by this means God the Father, who, in ſpite of the modern notions, could not but be conſidered as ſupreme, became diveſted, in their ideas, of ſome of his eſſential, and eſpecially of his amiable attributes, and was no longer the proper object of imitation or love.

When the worſhip of dead men, ſaints and angels, as well as that of Jeſus Chriſt was introduced, the true idea of the divine character and government was wholly loſt. God was no longer conſidered as the proper object of our love, and immediately acceſſible to his creatures; and

and chriſtians, getting, by degrees, as great a variety in the objects of their devotion as the heathens had, (objects of very different characters and diſpoſitions) they adopted as various, as whimſical, and as abject ſuperſtitions in their endeavours to recommend themſelves to their favour. The beauty and dignity of devotion being, by this means, loſt, its happy influence upon the mind vaniſhed; and inſtead of being favourable to benevolence, it became the ſource of hatred, rancour, and perſecution. No cruelties ever equalled thoſe that chriſtians have been inſtigated to, by thinking that *they did God ſervice*; nor was human pride ever ſo conſpicuous, as it has been in the diſciples of the meek and humble Jeſus.

A fatal corruption of men's ideas of virtue and moral obligation was the conſequence of falſe and corrupt notions of God: for the methods they would think of to recommend themſelves to his favour would, of courſe, vary with their ideas of his character and diſpoſition. It is no

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wonder, in particular, that they had recourſe to pains, penances, and whimſical auſterities, when they imagined they had to do with an arbitrary and capricious deity. Hence ſuch ideas of gloom and ſeverity came to be annexed to a *religious life*, as could never have exiſted if the divine being had been conſidered as one, who was, ſimply, *a lover of righteouſneſs, and a hater of iniquity*. Theſe ideas we call *monkiſh*, and ſuperſtitious; but they remain where monks are no more, and where ſuperſtition is diſclaimed.

I do not propoſe, in this place, to trace all the ſteps of this corruption of the ſpirit of chriſtianity. That our holy religion has been greatly corrupted is what all proteſtants are ſenſible of, and they all profeſs a zeal for its reformation; though ſome of them have been more ready to pull down than to build up, contenting themſelves with the eaſier taſk of the two.

By the labours of many courageous and excellent men, ſome of the groſſer cor-

corruptions of the chriſtian doctrine and diſcipline have been happily rectified, and the ſpirit of chriſtianity has been improved in conſequence of it; but much ſtill remains to be done, eſpecially with reſpect to doctrines that were introduced into the church in very early ages, doctrines that entirely diſfigure the chriſtian ſcheme, and debaſe its ſpirit, that make thouſands of unbelievers in chriſtian countries, and effectually prevent the general reception of chriſtianity among Jews, Mahometans, and Heathens. I mean, chiefly, the doctrines that are generally diſtinguiſhed by the term *Calviniſtical*.

It is true that thoſe doctrines daily loſe ground with all perſons who think for themſelves, and who ſtudy the ſcriptures; but much yet remains to be done to promote the general propagation of chriſtian truth as oppoſed to them; and being now, in a great meaſure, happily free from antichriſtian tyrrany, there is no other field in which we can exert ourſelves more to the advantage of the chriſtian

tian cauſe, than in clearing it from theſe things that ſo greatly diſfigure our religion, debaſe its ſpirit, and obſtruct its progreſs in the world.

It is by no means from a regard to *truth* only, that I am deſirous of contributing the little that may be in my power towards rooting out the above mentioned antichriſtian errors. The genuine ſpirit of chriſtianity, and a proper attention to the duties of it, are as much injured by theſe opinions, as the purity of chriſtian faith. If there be any thing that diſtinguiſhes the chriſtian religion from all others, it is its tendency to inſpire humility, candour, benevolence, and, I may add, chearfulneſs; whereas, I am convinced, from reflection and obſervation, that the opinions abovementioned tend to inſpire a gloomy, proud, uncharitable and malignant diſpoſition. In many inſtances the ſweeteſt natural tempers, and every other favourable circumſtance in a perſon's education and ſociety, have not been ſufficient to counteract their baneful influence. But there

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are many who only affect to believe, or only half believe thoſe doctrines for one who is thoroughly perſuaded of their truth. Upon the former their practical influence is, happily, little or nothing; and there are but few in compariſon, though too many, whoſe hearts are much injured by thoſe groſs miſconceptions concerning God and religion.

It cannot be wondered that the worſhippers of an auſtere and tyrannical deity ſhould contract a gloomineſs of temper; that thoſe who imagine themſelves to be the peculiar favourites of God, ſelected from all eternity from the reſt of mankind, ſhould be proud of the diſtinction, and, with the phariſee, ſay *ſtand by thyſelf, I am holier than thou*; that perſons ſo favoured ſhould have little cordial affection for thoſe who are reprobated of God, who are never to have any ſhare in his favour, and in whoſe everlaſting miſery they muſt for ever rejoice. It can be no wonder that perſons who habitually conſider virtue as no reaſon with the divine being for his prefer-

ence of one above another, ſhould themſelves be leſs influenced by thoſe principles of honour and integrity, which according to the dictates of nature, are the things that recommend men to the favour of God.

Thoſe who purſue the ſentiments above mentioned to their juſt and only conſiſtent length, diſclaim all moral obligation; maintaining that they were the ſame favourites of heaven before as after converſion, and have the ſame communion with God when they are abandoned to vitious indulgencies, as in the moſt devout meditation, or fervent prayer. Many perſons, whoſe natural good ſenſe reſtrains them from theſe extravagancies of opinion, will, however have leſs ſcruple to defraud or calumniate their neighbour, than to be deficient in thoſe *religious exerciſes*, that give an air of ſanctity to their character, and make them appear *righteous before men.*

The opinion that men are entirely paſſive in the work of converſion and the

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new birth, and incapable of themselves of so much as to think a good thought; and that saving faith consists in an acceptance of, or a dependance upon the merits of Christ for salvation, or (since it is a *feeling* rather than an *act* of the mind) what they are fond of calling *throwing themselves upon Christ*, or *a resting upon Christ for salvation*, must be the source of great distress to persons of an ingenuous disposition and good understanding; who cannot persuade themselves that they have felt what they conceive to correspond to those phrases, and who believe that they cannot be the children of God without having felt it. In this observation, I doubt not that I speak to the painful experience of many of my readers. Too many, also, it is to be feared, are driven to despair by these opinions; and, considering themselves as abandoned of God, plunge themselves in vice and ruin. If any persons *can* fancy themselves to have passed through this kind of undescribable new birth, as the feeling they have of it is incapable of being defined, they will be very apt to suf-

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pect its reality or genuineneſs, and conſequently will be ſubject to the moſt diſtreſſing doubts and fears; becauſe they will apprehend themſelves to be in a moſt dreadful ſituation, out of which they have no power to reſcue themſelves, and that God has probably denied them repentance.

If they be of a temper of mind *never* to doubt of the genuineneſs of their faith, and the reality of their converſion and new birth, they will have ſuch an idea of their rank and ſuperiority to the reſt of mankind, as muſt be utterly deſtructive of that chriſtian humility, through the influence of which we are *to work out our ſalvation with fear and trembling*, and will be inſpired with a more inſufferable, and a more dangerous pride than can ariſe from any other ſource.

When once men's ideas of the divine being are ſo much lowered, as they muſt be before they can ſuppoſe him to act in an arbitrary manner in the preference he gives to his rational and accountable crea-

creatures, and to beſtow his favours by rules that are independent of their regard to virtue, they will be apt to fancy that he may be pleaſed with a variety of things, indifferent to virtue, as they themſelves are. They will, conſequently, adopt many whimſical methods of rendering themſelves acceptable to God, and be liable to run into the moſt fooliſh and abject ſuperſtition; ſo that the ideas that they annex to *ſerving God* will be quite different from the practice of moral virtue. If there be any thing auſtere and gloomy in their own diſpoſitions, they will be apt to fancy that they give the fulleſt proof of their love to God, and conſequently pleaſe him the moſt, by thoſe actions that give pain and mortification to themſelves. Hence came the variety of penances, and the tireſome repetition of *pater noſters* and *ave marias*, as a mere bodily exerciſe, in the church of Rome; and it ſeems to be pretty evident that going to church, and attending prayers is conſidered by many members of the church of England in the ſame light. This they look upon as in the

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higheſt, and moſt proper ſenſe their *duty*, and they hardly ever attend to it as a means of cultivating good diſpoſitions, and fitting them for proper conduct in life. The frequent long and ſevere exerciſes, by which the orthodox diſſenters diſtinguiſh themſelves, are of the ſame nature. They ſerve to diſcharge their conſciences, as *a poſitive duty*; but have little influence to improve their diſpoſitions and their conduct.

Upon the whole, I cannot help thinking, that there is a ſtriking reſemblance between theſe profeſſors of chriſtianity, and the Phariſees in our Saviour's time, thoſe who *ſtrained at a gnat and ſwallowed a camel, who devoured widows houſes, and for a pretence made long prayers*; and that, were our Lord again upon the earth, he would treat them with the ſame ſeverity.

It may appear ſtrange, that the influence of falſe notions in religion ſhould not be confined to thoſe who hold them; but it is true, and much to be lament-

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ed. They affect both thoſe who have held them, and thoſe who obſerve them.

When the *cauſe* of any diſorder in the human body is removed, it is not always found that all its *effects* are immediately removed with it; and much leſs is this the caſe with the human mind. Falſe notions in religion vitiate a man's temper and diſpoſition, with the whole turn of his thinking and acting; and when theſe have been long fixed, they are ſeldom or never entirely changed. The old aſſociations will recur, and reaſon comes too late to break them. Thus the fear of being alone in the dark remains long after the leaſt belief in apparitions. Thoſe perſons, therefore, whoſe minds have been deeply impreſſed, in their infancy and youth, with abject and unworthy notions of God, may never be able, habitually and practically, to regard him in that amiable light, in which he is repreſented in the goſpel; as the object of filial reverence, love and confidence to all his creatures. Having long conſidered the divine being in no

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other light than that of a ſtrict moral governor, they cannot ſoon learn to regard him as their father and their friend, attentive to the intereſt of all his creatures, and waiting that he may be gracious to them. They will not eaſily get over all remains of the notion, that God is pleaſed by actions, and exerciſes, that give them pain and mortification. The ideas they annex to a *religious life* will ever convey the idea of ſomething grave, auſtere, and laborious; and never that of the eaſe, freedom, and chearfulneſs, which naturally belongs to it; and the ſervice of *God*, and of *man*, will not have that intimate connection in their minds, that they have in nature and in the ſcriptures.

When the mind has been deeply tinctured with any falſe notions of God, it is hardly poſſible that they ſhould ever be practically rectified; becauſe the ſame names will continue to ſuggeſt the ſame ideas, and to excite the ſame feelings, whatever reaſon may dictate to the contrary. Many talk of God like Arminius or So-

cinus, who, nevertheleſs, think of him much like Auſtin or Calvin. In their ideas he is a being that they cannot freely addreſs themſelves to; and whenever they do it, it is merely to comply with a poſitive enjoined duty. Tinctured as their minds are with the remains of ſuperſtition, it muſt be a long time before they can attain to *love God with their whole heart*, and habitually to rejoice in their relation to him, as their creator, preſerver, benefactor, friend, and father.

Many perſons, I doubt not, would be much more pious and devout than they are, were it not for theſe remains of ſuperſtition; which, though diſavowed, have a ſecret influence on their minds, dictating exerciſes and practices which they diſapprove and diſlike. Endeavouring to free themſelves from theſe bonds, they too often neglect devotion entirely, ſeldom praying themſelves, or ſeriouſly joining in the prayers of others; till they almoſt loſe all regard to God, and never look up to him with pleaſure or confi-

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dence. This habitual indevotion would not, I believe, in many caſes, have been contracted, if ſuperſtitious notions had not originally enjoined laviſh and unneceſſary religious exerciſes. Diſuſing theſe, before they could do it with the full conſent of their minds, inſtead of reſting in a juſt medium, they do what is not uncommon with men who believe themſelves to be guilty to a certain degree; they plunge themſelves in greater guilt.

It is particularly remarkable, that long after any thing has ceaſed to be conſidered as ſinful, we cannot do it without reluctance, and ſomething of remorſe; and this unjuſt ſelf-accuſation, and *falſe* remorſe, is not without its effect upon the mind, as well as the true. We ought not, therefore, to diſcontinue any practice that we have long thought neceſſary, immediately upon being convinced that it is not ſo, but wait till we can do it with perfect eaſe, and the full conſent of the ſoul.

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Many well diſpoſed perſons, I doubt not, find it extremely difficult to make their practice correſpond to their real ſentiments concerning the Lord's ſupper, and the Lord's day. They will do leſs with reſpect to the former, and more with reſpect to the latter, than, according to their judgment, they are obliged to do; and allowance ought to be made for certain degrees of this kind of inconſiſtency. Many perſons refrain from receiving the Lord's ſupper when they are perſuaded it is their duty to attend it, and are ſatisfied that they are properly qualified for it; yet, though they really wiſh to partake of this ordinance, they never do it. Theſe remains of prejudice are intitled to our indulgence, provided perſons really ſtrive with themſelves, and endeavour to overcome them.

With reſpect to the Lord's day, it is evident, that the influence of a rigorous, and what I ſhould not ſcruple to call a *phariſaical* obſervance of it, when it has been habitual and conſcientious, does not ceaſe with the opinion that it ought

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to do ſo; and, in this caſe, little or no inconvenience will ariſe from continuing, in ſome meaſure, through life, thoſe religious exerciſes, which we may have long thought neceſſary, and in refraining from thoſe indifferent actions which we may have thought to be ſinful on that day. If we controul the real feelings of our minds, though they ariſe from falſe notions, and an erroneous conſcience, we, in ſome meaſure, leſſen the power of conſcience in general, and may do an eſſential injury to ourſelves. He is truly happy who has attained that perfect *ſoundneſs of mind*, that he can do, with entire freedom and eaſe, whatever his judgment approves. To this perfect concurrence of the moral ſenſibilities of conſcience with the judgment of the underſtanding the apoſtle ſeems to refer, when he ſaith, (Rom. xiv. 22.) *happy is he that condemneth not himſelf in that thing which he alloweth.*

We ſuffer in a ſimilar manner from the remains of ſuperſtition and falſe notions, concerning the perſon and character of

Chriſt.

Christ. Much of the peculiar power of the gospel motives to virtue (separate from our acting with a view to obtain the reward of immortality promised in it) arises from just ideas of the nature and office of Christ; as distinct from those of the divine being himself, with which they are too much confounded upon the supposition of the proper deity of Christ, notwithstanding the different offices ascribed to each of the divine persons, or rather *beings*, in the Athanasian scheme.

The consideration of the *love of Christ* has something in it peculiarly endearing, when it is not considered as the same thing with the love of God towards his creatures, but as the love of one, who, notwithstanding his miraculous birth, was as much a *man* as Adam was, or as we ourselves are; when it is considered as the love of our *elder brother*, who *bare our infirmities*, who felt all the pains and agonies that man can feel, and, being the very same that we are, was *in all respects tempted as we are*; who *loved us and freely gave himself* to death *for us*,

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to redeem us from ſin and miſery; that we might become partakers of the ſame love of God, and be *joint heirs* with him of the ſame glory and happineſs; that we might all alike become *kings and prieſts unto God, even the father*, for ever and ever; who, after living many years on earth, in which he manifeſted the moſt intenſe affection for us, is now *gone to prepare a place for us, in our heavenly father's houſe*, that *where he is there we may be alſo*; as one who is now exerciſing a power which, as the reward of his obedience unto death, he received from God, to be *head over all things to his church*; and who ſtill feels for, and will be preſent with his faithful diſciples and followers, in all their trials, even to the end of the world.

The reſurrection of Chriſt, alſo, conſidering him as a man like ourſelves, is not only a *miracle*, and a *proof*, but alſo a *ſample* or *pattern* of our own reſurrection; which, certainly affects the mind in a peculiar manner, and gives us ſtronger reaſon to hope, that *becauſe he lives*,

we shall live also; since *as by* MAN *came death, so by* MAN *also came the resurrection of the dead.*

The esteem and love that we bear to such a character as we form of Christ, considered as a man like ourselves, the attachment we have to him and his cause, and the efficacy of this principle to promote a christian temper and conduct, and to encourage us to follow this our glorious leader, the *captain of our salvation*, and the *first fruits from the dead*, (even though, like him, we be called *to lay down our lives for our friends*, and to bear persecution and torture in the cause of conscience, virtue, truth, and God) is exceeding great, and peculiar to itself. It is a kind of love and esteem that cannot be felt by one who is truly and practically an Athanasian; and, in general, but imperfectly by those who have been Athanasians; and who, therefore, cannot easily get rid of the ideas they have had of Christ as God, or at least of a being who has little in common with us; who therefore could not feel as we do,

act upon views ſimilar to ours, or entertain, and be the proper object of, a ſimilar and reciprocal affection.

A man may have rejected the Athanaſian hypotheſis a long time before theſe ideas ſhall even occur to him, or their power be at all apprehended. At leaſt we can only expect to feel their influence at intervals, and muſt not hope to experience that amazing force, which, however, we may eaſily conceive they muſt have had with the primitive chriſtians, and eſpecially with the apoſtles, and others who perſonally knew Chriſt, and therefore never had an idea of his being any other than a man like themſelves; though as Peter expreſſes himſelf, *a man approved of God, by miracles, and wonders, and ſigns, which God did by him.*

It is alſo to be regretted, that men can hardly ever paſs from one extreme without going into another; and certainly a great deal of the libertiniſm and infidelity of the preſent age may juſtly be charged upon the real, or affected auſterity, and on the bigotry and unchriſtian

tian ſpirit of many who call themſelves the diſciples of Jeſus Chriſt; though he affected no auſterity or needleſs ſingularity of any kind, and was for that reaſon accuſed of being *a glutton and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and ſinners.*

It is to be regretted, however, I ſay, that becauſe the profeſſors of this *ſpurious chriſtianity* affect too much auſterity of character, the profeſſors of genuine chriſtianity ſhould indulge themſelves in too much levity; that, becauſe the former have over rated the duties of devotion, and made them ſtand for all the virtues of a chriſtian life, the latter ſhould neglect the really uſeful and decent forms of it; and that becauſe the former have much leſs real and vital religion than they ſeem to have, the latter ſhould ſeem to have leſs than they are really poſſeſſed of.

Upon the whole, however, as far as I can judge, from giving a good deal of attention to the diſpoſition and conduct of the different parties among the diſſenters, I am clearly of opinion, that

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the character of thoſe who may be called the more free livers among the rational diſſenters is, with reſpect to the true ſpirit of chriſtianity, ſuperior to that of thoſe who are, ſeemingly, the more devout and zealous of the other ſort. Take thoſe that have the leaſt appearance of what is commonly called *religion* among ſome men; and they will often be found to have more of a principle of honour, integrity, and generoſity; and to have a greater abhorrence of fraud, diſſimulation, and hypocriſy, than many who who pretend to a great deal of religion; and the vices juſt now mentioned are thoſe that ſink deepeſt into the heart, and vitiate the character the moſt. It certainly argues a wrong diſpoſition of mind to be aſhamed of virtue and piety, but it argues a worſe diſpoſition to be oſtentatious of them. The former is an exceſs, though a blameable exceſs of modeſty; whereas the latter is the offspring of pride and conceit.

If we may judge from the conduct of our Saviour, we ſhould conclude that there was ſomething more hateful and dan-

dangerous in the principles of the Phariſees, than in thoſe of the Sadducees. He frequently, and with great ſeverity, inveighed againſt the vices of the former, but never mentioned any thing as particularly heinous in the conduct of the latter. Admitting, therefore, that the principles of the Sadducees led to *libertiniſm*, we may conclude that the *pride* and *hypocriſy*, which he cenſured in the Phariſees, were more heinous vices.

Our aptneſs to paſs from one extreme to another, and the inconvenience attending it, are alſo felt with reſpect to our ſentiments concerning the perſon and character of Chriſt. Upon finding that, inſtead of being *very God of very God, the creator of heaven and earth*, he is only a man like ourſelves, we are apt, at firſt, to undervalue him, and not to conſider him in that diſtinguiſhed light in which, though a man, he is every where repreſented in the ſcriptures; as the great inſtrument in the hands of God, of reverſeing all the effects of the fall; as the object of all the prophecies from Moſes to his own time; as the great bond of union

to virtuous and good men (who, as *chriſtians*, or having Chriſt for their maſter and head, make *one body*, in a peculiar ſenſe) as introduced into the world without a human father; as having communications with God, and ſpeaking and acting from God in ſuch a manner as no other man ever did; and therefore having *the form of God*, and being *the ſon of God* in a manner peculiar to himſelf; as the means of ſpreading divine and ſaving knowledge to the whole world of mankind; as under God, *the head over all things to his church*; and as *the Lord of life*, having power and authority from God to raiſe the dead, and judge the world at the laſt day.

There ſeems to be a peculiar propriety that theſe powers reſpecting *mankind*, ſhould be given to a *man*; and it therefore *behoved* our Redeemer to be *in all things like unto his brethren*, and to be *made perfect through ſufferings*; but, certainly, the man who is inveſted with theſe powers and prerogatives ſhould be the object of our attention, reverence, and love, in ſuch a manner as no other man can be, or *ought* to be. I truſt

I truſt that the tendency to that extreme which is the reverſe of the auſterity of the old diſſenters will not be of long continuance, but will ceaſe with the ſpirit of oppoſition; and he may think himſelf happy who can, in the leaſt degree, be the means of accelerating this deſirable event. What greater object can a man have in view, than to eſtabliſh the evidences, aſcertain the genuine principles, extend the knowledge, and promote the ſpirit of chriſtianity, free from phariſaical rigour on one ſide, and a tendency to licentiouſneſs on the other.

It is with this view that I have made the following *addreſs to proteſtant diſſenters on the ſubject of church diſcipline*, intended to revive the genuine ſpirit and conduct of chriſtians, as members of a religious ſociety, and to exhort them, after having rejected what has proved to be tyrannical and miſchievous in church authority, to reſume what may appear to be conſiſtent with chriſtian liberty, to promote a chriſtian temper, and lead to good morals.

An Addreſs to Proteſtant Diſſenters on the ſubject of Church Diſcipline.

My Chriſtian Brethren,

HAVING addreſſed you formerly, and, I hope, not wholly without effect, on the ſubject of the *Lord's ſupper*, I now take the liberty to requeſt your attention to another ſubject, that nearly concerns you, as chriſtians, and which, I cannot help thinking, is too much neglected among us Diſſenters, and eſpecially thoſe of us, who are generally denominated *rational* Diſſenters; I mean CHURCH DISCIPLINE, or a proper proviſion for promoting the knowledge of chriſtianity, and more eſpecially the practice of the du-

ties of it, among the members of a chriſtian ſociety.

It is obvious to every perſon, who attends to the ſtate of chriſtianity in primitive times, and who reads the New Teſtament, and other early chriſtian writings; that, originally, chriſtian churches were particularly diſtinguiſhed by the vigour of their diſcipline; and it is no leſs evident, that the attention they paid to their profeſſion as chriſtians, their knowledge of the doctrines of chriſtianity, and their peculiar zeal in diſcharging the duties of it, and in adhering to their religion in difficult times, were, in a great meaſure, owing to this circumſtance.

It is no leſs obvious, that there is hardly the face of any thing that can be called *diſcipline*, among us; and I fear, that the effects of this deficiency are no leſs conſpicuous. Such, indeed, is the ſtate of things at preſent, that I have very little hope of ſeeing any effectual reformation. I am ſenſible that the bare

bare attempt to introduce any thing of this kind, would, in many caſes, be attended with peculiar difficulty. This however, ſhall not diſcourage me from endeavouring to bring the ſubject a little more into view. When we ſee the importance of the *end* to be gained by it, if we diſlike one *means*, we may, at leaſt, be thinking of ſome other.

To give you the cleareſt idea of this ſubject, and of what I would propoſe with reſpect to it, I ſhall divide this diſcourſe into ſeveral diſtinct ſections.

SECTION

SECTION I.

Of the ſtate and effect of church diſcipline, in primitive times.

WE are ſufficiently authorized to ſay, that the great end which the Almighty had in view, in the diſpenſation of the goſpel, was the reformation of a ſinful world; and that, whereas, before the coming of Chriſt, the Jewiſh nation alone, was honoured with the title of the *peculiar people of God*, the general promulgation of the goſpel of Chriſt, was intended to procure him, from *all* nations promiſcuouſly, *a peculiar people zealous of good works*.

Every chriſtian ſociety, therefore, having the ſame object in a particular place, that chriſtianity in general has with reſpect to the world at large, ſhould be conſidered as a voluntary aſſociation of perſons who embrace chriſtianity, and who are deſirous of taking the moſt effectual methods to promote the real ends

of it; or, in the language of ſcripture, *to build themſelves up in the holy faith whereof they make profeſſion, to edify one another, and to provoke unto love and to good works.*

The members of chriſtian ſocieties are to exhibit to the world around them, an engaging pattern of chriſtian virtue, faith, hope, and joy; that *others, ſeeing their good works, may glorify their father who is in heaven.*

In every chriſtian church, therefore, there ſhould be proviſion for admoniſhing all thoſe who tranſgreſs their duty; for *reproving, rebuking*, or *exhorting*, wherever there may be occaſion for it; for taking every favourable opportunity of ſuggeſting uſeful hints, cautions, and encouragements; in order to make good impreſſions on the minds of all, at thoſe ſeaſons in which they are moſt likely to be deep and laſting, as in time of ſickneſs, affliction, and diſtreſs. More eſpecially, there ſhould be proper proviſion that children and youth be particu-

larly attended to, that they be carefully inſtructed in the fundamental and practical principles of chriſtianity, in order that they may be well prepared for entering upon life with advantage, and be proof againſt the temptations and ſnares to which they will be expoſed in it. Laſtly, the weak and wavering ſhould be ſtrengthened, and have their difficulties removed. By this means, the great motives to a holy life, being continually kept in remembrance, every member of the ſociety may be *prepared for every good word and work*, be diſpoſed to act with propriety and dignity, as becomes men and chriſtians, upon every occaſion in life, and to die with compoſure and good hope.

To gain theſe great and valuable ends, in the preſent ſtate of human nature and of the world (in which every man is continually in danger of ſwerving from his duty, of indulging ſome inordinate paſſion, and contracting ſome bad habit) I need not ſay that ſome *apparatus* is neceſſary, for no end can be gained

gained without adequate means: and the methods that were adopted by the apoſtles and primitive chriſtians were excellently calculated to to anſwer theſe purpoſes.

The plan of a chriſtian church was originally the ſame with that of a Jewiſh ſynagogue, which (though, I believe, it was not of divine appointment) was admirably ſimple and proper. Synagogues were places ſet apart for the reading and expounding of the law, and alſo for prayer. Here the people in the neighbourhood aſſembled for theſe purpoſes, every ſabbath-day. A number of the more elderly perſons, and thoſe who had the moſt influence in the neighbourhood, had the title of זקנים, or elders, were appointed rulers of the ſynagogue, and had ſome kind of authority over thoſe who belonged to the place; and ſome one of them was generally diſtinguiſhed from the reſt, but only by precedence, and having the direction of the ſervice. The apoſtles and primitive chriſtians, having been uſed

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to these regulations in places of public worship, adopted them in the constitution of christian churches.

When, therefore, in consequence of preaching the gospel in any place, a number of persons were converted, the apostles immediately formed them into a *regular body*, and appointed proper *officers*. Those who were distinguished for their age, gravity, good character, and knowledge, were made *presbyters*, or *elders*; or, as they are sometimes called, *bishops*, though this last title was very soon appropriated to one of them; who was not, however, superior to the other elders in rank or authority, but only (to prevent confusion) presided in the assembly, and superintended the business of preaching, baptizing, and administering the Lord's-Supper. He also gave orders with respect to some other things, in which a number could not act to advantage.

Besides elders, and bishops, *Deacons*, also, were appointed. They were persons whose business it was to assist the elders

and

and the biſhop, particularly in adminiſtering to the poor, and in other things that were of a civil, and not of a ſpiritual nature.

But it was a fundamental principle in the conſtitution of the primitive churches, that no regulation, or reſolution, reſpecting the ſtate of the whole church, could be made but by the body of the people. They alſo choſe the biſhop and the elders, as well as the deacons.

Epiphanius, who flouriſhed A.D. 360, ſays, that nothing was neceſſary to the regular conſtitution of a church but elders and deacons; and that in churches where none of the elders were thought worthy of any diſtinguiſhed rank, there was no biſhop.

It was the buſineſs of the elders, and by no means of the biſhop only (who, in this reſpect, was only conſidered as one of them) to watch over the ſociety, for the moral and religious purpoſes above-mentioned. This is very evident from

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the book of Acts, and the apoſtolical epiſtles.

St. Paul, when, on his voyage to Jeruſalem, he called for the elders of Epheſus, addreſſed himſelf to them all alike, without diſtinguiſhing any particular perſon as biſhop, or miniſter; and, giving them all that name promiſcuouſly, exhorted them to *take heed to themſelves*, and *to all the flock over which the Holy Ghoſt had made them overſeers* (or biſhops, ἐπισκόπους) *to feed the church of God.* St. Peter alſo 1 Ep. v. 4. exhorts theſe elders to *feed the flock of God, taking the overſight thereof, not of conſtraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind, &c.*

The office of elder being of ſo much importance in the church, the apoſtle Paul is very particular in deſcribing thoſe who were proper to be appointed to it. In his epiſtle to Titus, i. 5. &c. he gives the following account of them. *For this cauſe I left thee in Crete, that thou ſhouldeſt ſet in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as*

I had

I had appointed thee. If any be blameleſs, the husband of one wife, having faithful children, not accuſed of riot, or unruly: for a biſhop (or one who overſees others) *muſt be blameleſs, as the ſteward of God, not ſelf willed, not ſoon angry, not given to wine, no ſtriker, not given to filthy lucre; but a lover of hoſpitality, a lover of good men, ſober, juſt, holy, temperate; holding faſt the faithful word, as he has been taught, that he may be able, by ſound doctrine, both to exhort, and to convince gainſayers.* It is evident, at firſt ſight, that the apoſtle, in this paſſage, uſes the terms *elder*, and *Biſhop* promiſcuouſly, applying them both to ſame perſons.

It is, no doubt, to the ſame order of men, that this apoſtle directs the following advices, 1 Tim. iii. 1. *This is a true ſaying; if any man deſire the office of a biſhop* (overſeer, or elder) *he deſires a good thing. A biſhop, then, muſt be blameleſs, the husband of one wife, vigilant, ſober, of good behaviour, given to hoſpitality, apt to teach; not given to wine, no ſtriker, not greedy of filthy lucre, but patient, not a brawler,*

ler, nor covetous; one that ruleth well his own houſe, having his children in ſubjection with all gravity. For if a man know not how to rule his own houſe, how ſhall he take care of the church of God? Not a novice, leſt, being lifted up with pride, he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he muſt have a good report of them that are without, leſt he fall into reproach, and the ſnare of the devil.

We find, in an epiſtle of Polycarp to the church of Phillipi, that the original idea of the character, duty, and authority of a preſbyter, or elder, was not altered in the middle of the ſecond century. "Let the preſbyter, ſays he, be tender "and merciful, compaſſionate towards "all, reducing thoſe who are in errors, "viſiting all who are weak, not neglect-"ing the widow and orphan, and him "that is poor; but ever providing that "which is honeſt in the ſight of God "and men; abſtaining from all wrath, "reſpect of perſons, and unrighteous "judgement; being far from coveteouſ-"neſs, not haſtily believing a report a-

"gainſt

"gainſt any man; not rigid in judge-
"ment, knowing that we are all faulty,
"and obnoxious to judgement." *King's conſtitution of the primitive church*, p. 59.

In times of perſecution this order of elders was particularly uſeful, in diſcharging all the duties of the epiſcopal, or paſtoral office, in the abſence of the biſhop or miniſter, and at his appointment. Thus Cyprian, Biſhop of Carthage, while in exile, writes to his elders, exhorting them "to diſcharge his own "and their office too; that ſo nothing "might be wanting, either to diſcipline, or diligence." ib. p. 62.

We ſee the ſentiments of the body of elders at Rome in the following paſſage of a letter, which they wrote to the elders at Carthage about the ſame time. "And ſince it is incumbent upon us, "who are as it were biſhops, to keep the "flock in the room of the paſtor; if we "ſhall be found negligent, it will be ſaid "unto us, as it was to our careleſs pre-"ceeding biſhops in Ezek. xxxiv. 3, 4.

"that

"that we looked not after that which was "loſt, we did not correct him that wan- "dered, nor bound up him that was "lame; but we did eat their milk, and "were covered with their wool." ib. p. 63.

In the abſence both of the biſhop and elders, the deacons officiated in all miniſterial duties.

At the firſt formation of chriſtian churches, there ſeems not to have been, in any reſpect, the leaſt difference between their elders and their biſhops, in point of qualification for the miniſterial office; nor will it be wondered at, when it is conſidered, that they were alike converts from the common ranks of life, and that none of them could have been educated with a view to any employment of that kind. Alſo, as the biſhops gave little or no more of their time to the ſociety, they had little or no greater ſhare in the church's ſtock, than other elders: and no biſhop or elder was wholly maintained out of it, unleſs he had no other ſubſiſtence, and gave his whole time

time and attention to the duties of his office, which was ſeldom or never the caſe.

It appears, however, that the nature of their ſituation ſoon made a change in this reſpect. It was found neceſſary, for the honour and credit of chriſtian churches, that the biſhop ſhould be a man of reading and learning, well verſed in the ſcriptures, and capable of expounding them; thoroughly acquainted with the grounds and principles of the chriſtian religion, and able to defend them againſt the objections of the philoſophers, and other enemies of chriſtianity in thoſe days. For this purpoſe he could not do leſs then give his whole time to ſtudy, and other duties of his ſtation. Upon this the biſhops began to ſhare more largely in the revenues of the church than any of the other elders; and at length it became the cuſtom of the weſtern churches, to divide all their collections into four parts; of which the biſhop had one, the elders and deacons, (who were alſo called the clergy) another,

ther, the poor a third, and the fourth was applied to the purpoſe of repairing their church, and other incidental expences. This diviſion of the church's ſtock is ſaid to have been the ſource of many diſputes and corruptions in the diſcipline of the weſtern church, from which the eaſtern church was always, in a great meaſure, free; the Greeks having never made any partition of this kind, but always diſtributed out of the common ſtock, according to every perſons neceſſities, and reaſonable claims. See *Simon's hiſtory of eccleſiaſtical revenues.*

I need not ſay that it was the cuſtom, in thoſe primitive times, to give a much greater proportion of their wealth to the common ſtock of their church, than is done by us at preſent. In the apoſtles times, even the rich made a ſurrender of all they had for this purpoſe; and for a long time a very great part of their wealth went the ſame way; but the officiating clergy were not the better for this. It was diſtributed *as every man had need.*

You ſee, then, that in every primitive chriſtian church, there was a number of perſons appointed by the ſociety, whoſe buſineſs it was to attend to the inſtruction and good behaviour of all the members of it; taking every opportunity of teaching thoſe who had need of inſtruction; who admoniſhed, reproved, or encouraged, as they ſaw occaſion; and who, as the apoſtle adviſed, were *inſtant in ſeaſon, and out of ſeaſon in this uſefull work.* I ſhall now give you, in a few words, an idea of the effect of this diſcipline.

The great object of it was the prevention of all vice, and irregularities of every kind, and eſpecially whatever tended to bring diſgrace upon chriſtianity, or might lead chriſtians to relapſe into heatheniſm; upon every inſtance of which they animadverted with the utmoſt ſeverity. I am far from aſcribing every thing that was good and exemplary in the primitive chriſtians, to their church diſcipline; but unqueſtionably it had its ſhare in producing many good

effects on their diſpoſitions and conduct; and it ſeems to be agreed by all writers, that, in thoſe early times, the chriſtians were remarkable for the virtues that are ſtill more emphatically called *chriſtian*, ſuch as meekneſs, patience, ſuperiority of mind to the world, and the ſtrongeſt attachment to one another, and to their religion; with reſpect to ſome of which, it muſt be owned, they were greatly aſſiſted by a general expectation of the ſpeedy coming of Chriſt to judge the world. For ſeveral centuries their church cenſures had no aid from the civil power, and yet they were more dreaded than they have ever been ſince, with all the terror of civil penalties ſuperadded to them.

Their rule of proceeding in theſe church cenſures, was that which is laid down by our Saviour, the propriety and reaſonableneſs of which, is evident at firſt ſight. *If thy brother*, ſays he, Matt. xviii. 15, . . . 18. *ſhall treſpaſs againſt thee, go and tell him his fault, betweeen thee and him alone; and if he will hear thee,*

thee, thou haſt gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witneſſes, every word may be eſtabliſhed. And if he ſhall neglect them, tell it to the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be to thee as an heathen man, and a publican. He adds, *Verily I ſay unto you, whatſoever ye ſhall bind on earth, ſhall be bound in heaven; and whatſoever ye ſhall looſe on earth, ſhall be looſed in heaven.*

From this it was generally concluded, that the cenſures of the church, paſſed in a ſolemn and unanimous manner, would be ratified at the tribunal of Chriſt, at the laſt day; ſo that a perſon cut off from the communion of the church here, would be excluded from heaven hereafter. And, indeed, if a man's conduct were ſuch, as expoſed him to this cenſure of his fellow chriſtians, of whoſe kindneſs and affection he had had abundant experience, and when they were under no bias or prejudice in giving their judgments, it is more than pro-

bable that it would be juſt, and therefore would be ratified in heaven; and we may preſume, that in primitive times, this was generally the caſe; notwithſtanding it cannot but be acknowledged, that a whole church may judge uncharitably and raſhly, and in this caſe, no doubt, their cenſures will not be ratified at the righteous tribunal of God.

Whatever was the cauſe, the effect of church cenſures in thoſe times was very extraordinary, notwithſtanding all that was done to thoſe who were expoſed to them, was only excluſion from their religious aſſemblies, for a longer or ſhorter ſpace of time, according to the nature of their offence. In no caſe were excommunicated perſons reſtored to church communion without public confeſſion, and in ſome caſes, as in repeated apoſtacy from chriſtianity, they were not abſolved even in the hour of death, but left to the judgment of God only.

It was cuſtomary, we are informed, for perſons under ſentence of excommu-

nication to attend at the doors of the church (for they were not permitted to enter) with all the marks of the deepeſt dejection and contrition, intreating the miniſters and people, with tears in their eyes, making voluntary confeſſion, and earneſtly begging their prayers, and reſtoration to the peace of the church.

Perſons the moſt diſtinguiſhed for their wealth or power, were indiſcriminately ſubject to thoſe church cenſures, and had no other method of being reſtored to the peace of the church, but the ſame humiliation and contrition that was expected of the meaneſt of the ſociety. When Philip governor of Egypt would have entered a chriſtian church, after the commiſſion of ſome flagrant crime, the biſhop forbad him till he firſt made confeſſion of his ſin, and paſſed through the order of penitents; a ſentence, which, we are told, he willingly ſubmitted to.

Even the emperor Theodoſius the great was excommunicated by Ambroſe biſhop of Milan, for a barbarous ſlaughter of

the Theſſalonians; and that great prince ſubmitted to a penance of eight months, and was not received into the church till after the moſt humble confeſſion of his offence, and giving the moſt undeniable proof of his ſincerity.

SECTION II.

A general account of the corruption and decay of the primitive church diſcipline.

HAVING, in the preceding ſection, given a view of the out-lines of the antient church diſcipline, and the general effects of it; I ſhall now endeavour to trace the corruptions of it.

The firſt great change in the conſtitution and diſcipline of the chriſtian church, was the exaltation of the preſbyters or elders, and of the deacons alſo, into the rank of ſingle biſhops, in churches; which was, in fact, an annihilation of thoſe important orders of men, and throwing

throwing the whole government of a church into the hands of one perſon.

The manner in which this change took place, was gradual and eaſy. Whenever the number of converts in any place became too great to aſſemble, with convenience, in one building, they erected other places of public worſhip; but (conſidering thoſe not as *new*, and *diſtinct churches*, but as branches of the old one) in order to preſerve the connection with the mother church, they did not ordain any new biſhop, but had all the miniſterial duty done, either by ſome of the former preſbyters and deacons; or by new preſbyters and deacons ordained for the purpoſe. In this train things went on, till, at length, the mother church, or ſome of the dependent churches, ſending out more colonies, and to greater diſtances; the biſhop of the mother church, being the only perſon in the diſtrict who bore that name, came to be *a dioceſan biſhop*, whoſe elders and deacons preſided in all the ſeparate and dependant churches, without any aſſiſtant or ſubordi-

ſubordinate miniſters. Very few elders alſo remained in the mother church, becauſe none were now ordained to that office, except ſuch as lived by the miniſtry; ſo that the members of chriſtian ſocieties had no longer ſuch particular attention paid to their conduct as before.

For ſome time, however, when new churches were erected, in places at a diſtance from any capital town, they were governed by new made biſhops, preſbyters, and deacons, like the original churches. Beauſobre ſays, (Hiſtory of Manicheiſm, Vol. I. p. 113.) that he believes one cannot find an inſtance ſo early as the middle of the third century, of a church governed by a ſimple preſbyter.

Theſe country biſhops (called chorepiſcopi) made but a poor figure in compariſon of the opulence and ſplendour of the city biſhops; and as the ſyſtem of *dioceſan epiſcopacy* gained ground, they were compelled to deſcend to the order of

of presbyters. Upon this the scheme of episcopacy, as it is now generally understood, was fully established. There were bishops in capital towns only, and all the churches within their district were governed by presbyters, or deacons, under them.

I need not say that the consequence of this change in the external government of the church, was the total loss of the antient internal discipline; when, instead of there being a number of persons in every church, *to feed the flock of God*, there was only a bishop in a capital town, whose whole attention was generally employed upon the emoluments and authority of his office, with respect to the inferior churches; which were governed by a single presbyter or deacon, dependant upon the diocesan bishop, chiefly, for his nomination, and upon his people for his revenues.

2. Another, and indeed an earlier abuse of the primitive discipline was introduced by factious persons, who employed

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church cenſurers to animadvert upon particular *opinions*, as well as practices; in conſequence of which, men of unexceptionable characters and conduct were excommunicated, if they only held opinions that had been condemned by a council or ſynod. The perſons thus cenſured, often formed ſeparate churches, and, in return, excommunicated thoſe who had excommunicated them.

In this ſtate of mutual hoſtility things often continued a long time, till the influence of an emperor, or ſome other foreign circumſtance, determined the diſpute in favour of one of them, which was from thenceforth deemed the *orthodox* ſide of the queſtion, while the other was condemned as *heretical*. It is well known that the Arians and Athanaſians were, in this manner, reputed *orthodox* by turns; as both had the ſanction of councils and emperors in their favour; till, in conſequence of mere faction, and the authority of the emperors, the party of Athanaſius happened to prevail at laſt. But the firſt remarkable abuſe of

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the power of excommunication, Le Clerc ſays, was on account of the celebration of Eaſter, when Victor, biſhop of Rome, excommunicated all the Eaſtern churches that did not celebrate that feſtival at the ſame time with the Weſtern churches. *Hiſt. Eccl.* p. 802.

3. The primitive church diſcipline was farther corrupted by the annexing of *civil penalties* to the ſentence of excommunication. Theſe were introduced when the Roman emperors became chriſtians; for in the imperial conſtitutions, made after that event, we preſently find various civil diſqualifications added to the cenſures of the church; and the whole ſyſtem of this mixed eccleſiaſtical and civil polity received a freſh ſanction upon the converſion of the *Germans*, *Goths*, *Celtes*, and other Northern nations. Theſe people had been uſed to an *excommunication* in their own pagan religions, and the conſequences of it had always been the moſt dreadful civil penalties and diſabilities. Among the *Gauls* the excommunicated perſons were looked

looked upon as wicked and ſcandalous wretches. All people ſhunned their company. They were not allowed the benefit of the courts of juſtice, nor were they admitted to any poſt of honour or profit in the community.

Of this prejudice of the people the chriſtian prieſts willingly took advantage, as by this means they could overawe thoſe who deſpiſed mere church cenſures; which, indeed, had become truly contemptible, by the manner in which they had been conducted. Civil penalties for offences againſt the church were increaſed by degrees, till hereſy came to be conſidered as a crime of ſo heinous a nature, that burning alive was decreed to be the proper puniſhment for it; and this horrid exceſs was not confined to the church of Rome, which is *drunk with the blood of the martyrs*, but has been imitated, in more than one inſtance, by ſeveral ſects of the reformed themſelves.

4. Under the preceding article, I may be ſaid to have enumerated the moſt

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horrid abuse of church discipline; but that which may more properly be called the most *scandalous* abuse of it, was the injunction of a variety of ridiculous *penances*, as walking barefoot, repeating a certain number of *Pater-nosters* and *Ave-Marias*, pilgrimages, &c. and especially the commutation of those for sums of money; whereby, at length, every sin had its fixed price; and a person might purchase a pardon, not only for all the sins he had actually committed, but for all those that he, or any fixed number of persons, might commit, in any given time to come. That no offences, or occasions of making these profits, might be neglected, and also that the priests might confirm and extend their influence over the people in a variety of ways, the practice of *auricular confession* was introduced. It was the scandal of *indulgences* that was the immediate cause of the reformation in Germany, headed by Luther and his associates.

In consequence of these abuses, religion became a mere trade, and was a

fund of vaſt wealth to the prieſts and the court of Rome, who ſpent the ſums they extorted from the ſuperſtition of the people in the moſt abominable excelles.

SECTION III.

A more particular account of the very low ſtate of church diſcipline among us, and the inconveniencies attending it.

AT the reformation, the capital abuſes of church diſcipline were reformed, along with other corruptions; but ſtill the propriety and vigour of the truly primitive diſcipline, has never yet been reſtored. All eſtabliſhed churches, I believe, have annexed more or leſs of civil penalties to the ſentence of excommunication; and all churches, eſtabliſhed or not eſtabliſhed, have confounded matters of opinion, i. e. mere miſtakes of the head, with the corruptions of the heart and life.

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In the church of England, as in the church of Rome, neither the biſhop nor the preſbyter do, in the leaſt, correſpond to thoſe orders of men in the primitive church. The biſhop, inſtead of preſiding in one ſociety of chriſtians, who meet in one place, is encumbered with the ſuperintendency of a large dioceſe, or diſtrict, in which are many churches; and the preſbyters, or prieſts, are thoſe who officiate, in theſe ſubordinate churches. The deacons, alſo, are only *miniſters*, or *clergy* of an inferior claſs, and nothing is left to correſpond to the antient *elders*, ſeveral of whom generally preſided in every primitive church. The little that doth remain of this office, together with that of deacon, is done by the *churchwardens*.

As to the *biſhops courts*, in which church cenſures and excommunications are paſſed, in which lay-chancellors and commiſſaries preſide (officers unknown for more than four centuries in the chriſtian church) courts in which the moſt vexatious civil penalties are inflicted, in which

which ſuits are conducted in the moſt expenſive and oppreſſive manner, and in forms quite contrary to the ſpirit of the Engliſh conſtitution; I need not ſay they bear no reſemblance of, and are no proper ſubſtitute for, the antient church diſcipline. I think it is agreed on all hands, that, inſtead of being of any uſe for the reformation of manners, they are a great grievance, and a nuiſance to this country.

The *Presbyterians* of the old ſtamp, had elders in every particular church. In the firſt church of this denomination, formed at Wandſworth near London, in 1572, eleven elders were appointed (*Neal's hiſtory of the Puritans*, Vol. I. p. 202) and as far as I am informed concerning the regulations of particular churches in Scotland, it is, upon the whole, very well adapted to anſwer the purpoſe of church diſcipline.

Each pariſh, in proportion to the extent of it, is divided into particular diſtricts, and every diſtrict has its own ruling

ruling elders and deacons. The ruling elders are men of principal quality and intereſt in the pariſh, and the deacons are men of good character for manners and underſtanding. A conſiſtory of the miniſter, the elders, and deacons, is called a *kirk ſeſſion*, which meets once a week, to conſider the affairs of the pariſh. The miniſter is always the moderator, but without a negative. *Neal*, Vol. II. p. 260. The number of elders is indefinite, but generally twelve in each pariſh. *Hiſtory of Religion*. Index. In ſome churches, I am informed, they amount to ſixteen or eighteen.

In the firſt *Independent* church that was erected in England, there was only a paſtor and deacons appointed. In ſome of their churches, I believe, there are one or two elders; but their deacons have powers ſimilar to thoſe of the elders in the primitive church; though they are not near ſo numerous as the elders in the primitive churches.

The terms of church communion, both among the old Presbyterians and Independants, were much too narrow; both of them insisting upon the belief of certain opinions, which many are so far from thinking to be christian, that they look upon them to be antichristian; and the Independants require also such an account of what they call *experiences* in religion, as there is not a shadow of ground for in the New Testament, and which few but enthusiasts will pretend to.

The immediate object of church-discipline among the *Independents* is two-fold, viz. an almost perfect uniformity in matters of faith, and also the religion of the heart with respect to God; both of which, in the extent to which they carry them, are very improper subjects of human judicature, and which it is highly dangerous to the interests of christianity for men to intermeddle with.

The articles contained in many of the *church-covenants* that I have seen, and which every communicant is obliged to subscribe,

ſubſcribe, are far more numerous than the *thirty-nine* of the church of England; and, beſide all the abſurdities and contradictions of what is commonly called the *Calviniſtical ſyſtem*, enjoin an unity of opinions, with reſpect to ſuch things as all the eſtabliſhed churches in the world have left indifferent; ſo that all the miſchiefs that can attend human impoſitions in matters of religion, in any part of the chriſtian world, are found among them; except, that they have not the power to perſecute unto death, thoſe who differ from them.

As to the ſecond object of their diſcipline, viz. the ſtate of the heart with reſpect to God, and a perſon's actual fitneſs for heaven, their conduct is not only abſurd, but dangerous to the intereſts of real virtue. All that men can be proper judges of, is the outward propriety and regularity of behaviour. This was all that the primitive churches attended to; and whenever men pretend to decide concerning any thing but plain *facts*, of which every man can judge by

the evidence of ſeeing and hearing, a field is open for the utmoſt extravagance of fancy, which may be productive of the groſſeſt ſelf-deluſion and impoſition.

It has pleaſed the divine being, for good and obvious reaſons, not to make the terms of ſalvation ſo very determinate, as that a man ſhall be able to pronounce with *abſolute certainty* concerning the future ſtate of himſelf or others, while we are in this life. It is evidently the beſt for us never to be without the influence both of *hope* and *fear*; and therefore all that we have authority to ſay from the ſcriptures, is, that when we have a fixed reſolution to do our duty, as far as it is known to us, we have reaſon to *hope*; and that when we either have not that reſolution, or when our virtuous purpoſes are eaſily over-borne by the influence of temptations, we have reaſon to *fear*. This is the neareſt that any man can judge, even in his own caſe; and by this rule let every man *examine himſelf*, though not with a view to church-communion. All

that others can ſee or judge, is, whether a man's conduct in life be ſuch as is unworthy of their ſociety; i. e. in this caſe, contradictory to his profeſſion as a chriſtian, and ſuch as would be in danger of corrupting or diſgracing them.

Inſtead of proceeding upon theſe maxims, which are eaſy, uſeful, and authorized by the ſcriptures and the practice of the primitive church, the Independants judge by rules exceedingly obſcure and doubtful; their proceedings have a dangerous tendency with reſpect both to the candidates for church-communion, and thoſe who ſit as judges of their qualifications; and their whole ſyſtem of diſcipline has no countenance in our only rule of faith and duty, and no example for very many centuries in the chriſtian church.

What can be more precarious than to judge of a man's fitneſs for chriſtian communion by certain *internal feelings*, which are incapable of being deſcribed, except by ſtrong metaphors; by a kind of *faith*

that is different from believing, and a *new birth*, that is ſomething elſe than a change of affections and conduct, proceeding from rational motives; a new birth, in which a man is entirely paſſive, and to which nothing he does, or can do, does in the leaſt contribute. What room is not here left for ſelf-deluſion with reſpect to the candidate, and impoſition with reſpect to the judges. How dangerous alſo, is the conceit that is encouraged in the candidate, who hereby declares his opinion of his fitneſs for the communion of the ſaints on earth and in heaven; and what muſt we think of the preſumption and arrogance of thoſe who make themſelves judges in ſuch a caſe. Such a diſcipline as this, which, in the moſt favourable view of it, chiefly reſpects the feelings of the heart, might be worthy of the cloyſtered monk, but is certainly hurtful in real life.

Men who act upon this ſyſtem will be liable to be impoſed upon both by the viſionary and the artful, in plainer terms,

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by the *fools* and the *knaves*. The one will really believe that they have felt and experienced what is abſolutely incompatible with the human faculties; and the latter, ſeeing that nothing elſe will do, will be tempted to dreſs up a tale in the only ſtyle that will take. It is no ſecret, that, in ſome places, thoſe who are verſed in the *peculiar ſtyle* of the party, have made a buſineſs of drawing up experiences for thoſe who wanted them.

In ſaying this I mean no ridicule. The repreſentation is true, and lamentable. I have even heard it complained of by ſeveral honeſt and ſenſible miniſters of that perſuaſion; who, though thoroughly calviniſtical in other reſpects, cannot but be ſenſible how unſcriptural and miſchievous this ſyſtem of church-diſcipline is.

For my own part I am very willing to think that the moſt corrupt ſpecies of chriſtianity is better than none; but I do not ſcruple to declare, that, in my opinion, it is better to have no church-diſ-

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cipline at all, than that of the Independents.

With the generality of those who are now called Presbyterians in England, the whole government of the society, with respect to morals, is in the hands of the minister. There is no regular appointment of any officers. If there be any, they are those who, by tacit consent, officiate as deacons only, and barely carry about the bread and wine in the administration of the Lord's supper. Something, however, of the idea of the ancient elder is annexed to their character, as they are generally expected to be some of the more grave and serious persons in the society.

So long has every appearance of church discipline been neglected in many of our societies, that nothing of the kind is expected of the minister, tho' he is the only person who has so much as any nominal authority in the place; and so far is it from being expected of him to visit his hearers, in order to inquire into

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the ſtate of their families, and to give them advice and admonition, as was the cuſtom formerly, that I am informed there are ſocieties among us, in which the miniſters are expreſsly forbidden to viſit their hearers, except by particular invitation. It is certain that the leaſt hint of an admonition out of the pulpit would, in many places, give unpardonable offence; and theſe maxims, I am afraid, are gaining ground among us.

In ſhort, a diſſenting miniſter, among thoſe who are uſually called the *rational diſſenters*, begins now to be conſidered as a perſon who is paid by his hearers for haranguing them once a week; and the people attend the place of divine worſhip, if not from mere unthinking habit, with the ſame views with which they would attend the lectures of any other perſon, from whom they expected inſtruction or entertainment. Many of them have hardly the idea of having any thing *to do themſelves*, or *with one another*; ſo that the performance of the miniſter being the only object of attention, if they diſ-

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like his ſentiments or delivery, they make no difficulty of quitting the ſociety, provided they can pleaſe themſelves better elſewhere.

In fact, all the real buſineſs, or connection that the generality of our *hearers* (as they are now uſually and properly called) have with the ſociety, is to attend the baptiſm of their children, and to have the prayers of the church, on thoſe few occaſions, on which it would ſtill be conſidered as *indecent* not to have them. The Lord's ſupper is neglected, partly through ſome remains of ſuperſtition hanging upon their minds with reſpect to it; but in part, alſo, I am afraid, thro' indifference to it, as a religious act, and becauſe they find that, conſiſtent with decency, it may be neglected. Indeed the neglect of church-communion is now ſo general, that thoſe who do attend the Lord's ſupper, are more *marked*, and ſingular, than thoſe who do not. If it were poſſible for a primitive chriſtian to ſee the order of our churches, he would hardly think there was the appearance of our profeſſing ourſelves chriſtians;

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and indeed thoſe who do not believe chriſtianity do almoſt every thing that we do. How then, my Brethren, do we diſtinguiſh ourſelves in the face of the world, and confeſs Chriſt before men, when we are, in fact, rather aſhamed of the ſtrict and proper profeſſion of chriſtianity?

In the church of England the people have *reſponſes* to make, and I believe it would be particularly noticed if a perſon habitually omitted communion; which, together with other things of a ſimilar nature, gives the members of that church ſomething to do; which fixes their attention, and makes the diſcourſe of the miniſter to be conſidered as the leaſt eſſential part of the ſervice. The people going to church, and doing what they call their *duty*, is, with them, quite a different thing from the miniſter doing his.

In this reſpect (though in little elſe) it muſt be owned, they reſemble the primitive chriſtians. With them the church or the ſociety, was every thing, and the preſiding biſhop was comparatively of

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ſmall account. They met *to edify one another*; to read the ſcriptures, to pray, ſing pſalms, occaſionally to admoniſh and cenſure particular members, and always to expreſs their relation to one another, and to Chriſt their common head, by partaking of the Lord's ſupper. The diſcourſe of the miniſter, or his mode of delivery, were with them things of trifling conſequence, in compariſon of theſe. They had no idea of leaving any chriſtian ſociety on that account, and the man who ſhould have done it would not have been received in any other.

The inconveniencies attending our maxims and conduct, are great and manifeſt. That any ſingle perſon, however well diſpoſed, or well qualified, ſhould conduct the whole buſineſs of church diſcipline, as it is deſcribed in the New Teſtament, and practiſed in the primitive church, in admoniſhing, reproving, comforting, and adviſing all the members of a large chriſtian ſociety; and, at the ſame time, do what is now expected of the miniſter or paſtor, in compoſing ſermons,

preaching

preaching twice every Lord's day, and often on other days, baptiſing children, adminiſtering the Lord's ſupper, and viſiting the ſick, is, at the firſt view, impoſſible. And when it is added, that this perſon is generally intirely dependent upon the ſociety he ſo ſerves for his ſubſiſtence, we may certainly ſay, that if it were poſſible, it is, in the nature of things, highly improbable that he ſhould do it, with fidelity and good effect. It is much more than can be expected from the powers or virtue of man; and it may juſtly be ſaid, that every idea of the antient church diſcipline, and of the uſes of it, muſt have been loſt, before ſuch an imperfect ſyſtem as ours could have been adopted.

The generality of our diſſenting miniſters are, in a variety of reſpects, exceedingly unfit to diſcharge many important parts of the duty of the antient elders. The buſineſs of compoſing ſermons and preaching, in a manner obliges them to adopt a *ſtudious and retired life*; ſo that they are often the laſt perſons to hear of any irregularity in the ſociety; and when they

they do hear of such things, admonition or reproof would, in almost every case, be too late.

Ministers, for the same reason, cannot have much personal acquaintance, except with a very few of their hearers; and therefore cannot watch favourable opportunities of advising them for their good; so that if they intermeddle at all, it must almost unavoidably be in such a manner, as is the least likely to have any good effect.

Besides, the business of advising, admonishing, and reproving, requires very different talents from those of composing and delivering sermons. Nay it requires that practical knowledge of human nature, life and the world, that but seldom falls to the share of those who excel the most as preachers. It cannot therefore be expected of them.

Lastly, They who undertake this business should be men independent of those whom they may have occasion to admonish or rebuke, and by no means in the

the ſituation of the generality of diſſenting miniſters; who will neceſſarily feel themſelves reſtrained from doing their duty by the fear of giving offence, and of loſing the affections and contributions of their more conſiderable hearers. Are not your miniſters men, and men of like intereſts and paſſions with yourſelves?

Upon the whole, it muſt be evident to every thinking perſon, that to contrive and execute every thing that ought to be done to promote the real intereſt of a chriſtian ſociety, no one perſon can be ſufficient; and that the joint labour and attention of many perſons, of different talents and ſituations, are abſolutely neceſſary.

For want of this, there muſt be frequent inſtances, in every large ſociety, of perſons contracting bad habits without any opportunity of being admoniſhed and warned of their danger; of ſome who are a diſgrace to their profeſſion, and even to human nature, and yet are never reproved, much leſs publickly

lickly cenſured; and of perſons labouring under affliction or diſtreſs, without the aſſiſtance of thoſe conſolations, which a chriſtian friend might ſuggeſt, and which their own minds were not in a proper ſituation to attend to.

In our ſituation, many perſons muſt entertain doubts and difficulties, which they have no opportunity of having diſcuſſed and cleared up; difficulties, which may lead to ſcepticiſm and infidelity. And ſo looſely do we hang together, that any perſon may entirely quit our ſocieties, without being expected to give any reaſon for it, and without any cenſure upon his conduct by thoſe who continue in it.

SECTION

SECTION IV.

An account of the circumſtances that have contributed to bring church diſcipline into ſo low a ſtate among us.

THAT church diſcipline is in a very low and imperfect ſtate among the rational diſſenters, and that, in conſequence of it, the original ends of a chriſtian ſociety are very imperfectly anſwered, has, I imagine, been ſufficiently demonſtrated in the preceding ſection. In this I ſhall endeavour to trace the cauſes of it, and I think it will not be difficult to do this. I wiſh the remedy of this evil, which I ſhall treat of in the next ſections, were half ſo eaſy.

Thoſe perſons who bore the title of preſbyters or prieſts, had been ſo long elevated above their rank of elders, and had enjoyed ſuch conſiderable benefices, that it was ſome time before many of the reformers could think of creating officers under the ſame name, with in-

ferior powers and appointments. This was probably the reaſon why the Independents contented themſelves with a miniſter and deacons only.

The Engliſh Puritans, however, ſo early as the reign of Queen Elizabeth, propoſed to change the churchwardens and overſeers of the poor into elders and deacons. *Neale*, Vol. I. p. 232. They held that the elders, joined with the miniſters, ſhould be overſeers of the manners and converſation of all the congregation; that they ſhould be choſen out of the graveſt and moſt diſcreet members, that they ſhould alſo be of ſome note in the world, and able, if poſſible, to maintain themſelves. *Ibid*, p. 449.

As far as their circumſtances would permit, all the old Puritans and Preſbyterians formed their churches upon this plan; but this regular form of a church, and the diſcipline to which it was ſubſervient, are now almoſt univerſally grown into diſuſe among us.

1. I almoſt think that one of the firſt things that contributed to it, was the indefatigable zeal of the miniſters in thoſe difficult times. Giving their whole time and attention to their reſpective congregations, aided by a ſuperſtitious reverence and reſpect, that had long been paid to chriſtian miniſters, and being, many of them, men of wealth and influence in other reſpects, they diſcharged all the duties both of miniſters and elders; while theſe latter, being not ſo well qualified for the work, and their office itſelf commanding little or no reſpect, were overlooked by the people; and beſides not being paid for their ſervices, the people were more careful not to give them unneceſſary trouble. The elders, therefore, having little or nothing to do in the ſociety, the formal ordination of them, by prayer and impoſition of hands, grew into diſuſe; and the deacons, whoſe office could not ſo well be diſpenſed with, were nominated by the miniſter himſelf, with the tacit conſent of the people.

2. It may alſo be ſuppoſed to have contributed to the diſuſe of *nominal elders*, that the people, without diſtinction of perſons, were deſirous of procuring the prayers and advice of any perſons, in the ſociety who had a character for underſtanding and piety. For many of theſe, being modeſt perſons, choſe to continue theſe ſervices, and in other reſpects, alſo, to do the duty of elders, without any formal appointment. Chriſtian zeal decreaſing in peaceable times, fewer of thoſe perſons were to be found; ſo that, at length, moſt of our ſocieties were deſtitute both of nominal elders, and alſo of any perſons to do the duty of elders. At the ſame time religious zeal decreaſing alſo among the people, there was very little demand for thoſe offices for which elders were applied to by the people, and conſequently the want of them was not ſo ſenſible; and the want of what they did as it were *ex officio* or without ſolicitation, as adviſing, and exhorting, &c. was not of ſuch a nature as to occaſion any great alarm.

3. As luxury and a love of pleaſure naturally prevail in times of peace, it was found more difficult to engage men of fortune to fill up the ſtation of elders, and in places where this church power was in the hands of perſons of the loweſt ranks, without natural influence or authority, the whole buſineſs could not but ſink into contempt.

4. So long as a kind of ſuperſtitious regard to miniſters was kept up among the Diſſenters, they had an authority, which, in ſome meaſure, ſuperſeded all other powers in the congregation; but this undue reverence is now generally ſubſided, and, as might naturally be expected, the people are rather tending to the other extreme; ſo that the whole power of church diſcipline being in the hands of the miniſter, and his authority and influence, in a manner, annihilated, our ſocieties are left deſtitute of any proviſion for thoſe purpoſes for which the antient diſcipline was eſtabliſhed.

5. The diſcipline of a church has ſome-

times been loſt upon a change of miniſters. Many of the elder miniſters were poſſeſſed of ſufficient authority for any purpoſe of church diſcipline; but their ſucceſſors, being young men, could not with any propriety aſſume the ſame. They would only have expoſed themſelves to ridicule by the attempt; and before they had got years and experience, the people, having been unaccuſtomed to any kind of diſcipline, would not bear it. Thus has miniſterial authority, which was a kind of ſubſtitute for church diſcipline, often died with particular miniſters, and has not revived under any of their ſucceſſors.

6. Another circumſtance that has had a conſiderable ſhare in bringing church-diſcipline into its preſent low ſtate among us, is, the greater *freedom of thinking*, that firſt began to take place among the miniſters, and is now generally diffuſed through the people. For ſome time, however, the bulk of the people, and eſpecially the church officers, who were generally the more ſerious and

zealous

zealous of their members, continuing ſtrongly attached to the opinions in which they had been educated, the miniſters found themſelves greatly incommoded by them; the church officers often making parties in the congregation in oppoſition to the miniſter, and controling him in his favourite meaſures and conduct. In this diſagreeable ſituation the miniſters purpoſely neglected to fill up vacancies in church offices, and were, in general, heartily glad when they became intirely extinct.

For the ſame reaſon that miniſters promoted the abolition of church-offices, they diſcontinued, in many places, as far as was in their power, all private meetings for religious exerciſes, and even the catechizing of children; in ſhort, every thing but the more *conſpicuous* duties of their office. Entertaining ſentiments in religion different from thoſe of their people, and ſuch as their people would not have borne with, they endeavoured to keep them as much as poſſible out of view; and finding themſelves

more

more particularly incommoded and embarraſſed with the *extra* duties of their office, they laid hold of every opportunity of aboliſhing them.

It is greatly to be lamented, that the progreſs of chriſtian knowledge ſhould have been unfavourable to any uſeful proviſion for promoting the ſpirit and practice of chriſtianity; but ſuch have been, and ſuch, in many places, ſtill *are* our circumſtances, that it was, and is unavoidable. I only fear leſt the miniſters, and the more intelligent of their people, reflecting on the obſtacles that have been thrown in the way of all improvements in religious knowledge by the old ſyſtem of church-diſcipline, and other methods adapted to promote the knowledge and practice of religion, ſhould never be brought to bear the idea of them with patience, even though they might be applied to the beſt purpoſes.

It is too much the diſpoſition of mankind to refuſe the aid of thoſe powers that have been employed againſt them, though

though they be capable of being rendered as favourable to their views, as they have ever been unfavourable to them. The folly and unreaſonableneſs of this conduct, however, is ſuch, that I ſhould think that men of reaſon and reflection might be made ſenſible of it; and that, after ſome time, at leaſt, they might be able to get over their averſion to any uſeful inſtitution, or cuſtom, how much ſoever it may have been abuſed.

SECTION V.

A more particular View of the progreſs and preſent eſtimation of preaching.

AS the buſineſs of *preaching* is become almoſt the ſole object of our aſſemblies, I ſhall give a more particular account of the original ſtate, progreſs, and preſent eſtimation of it.

What we now call *preaching*, was originally nothing more than *expounding the ſcriptures*;

ſcriptures; which not the biſhop only, but any perſon who was qualified for it, whether elder, deacon, or ordinary layman, might do, with the permiſſion of the biſhop; and which might have been omitted altogether, and the ſervice not have been reckoned incomplete, if it had happened that no perſon preſent had any thing to obſerve, on the ſubject of what had been read: and it is not improbable that this muſt have happened pretty often, as the primitive chriſtians ſeem to have followed the example of the Jews, who read their ſacred books in order; and ſome parts would hardly require, or admit of any illuſtration. Among the Jews it is probable, that, originally, *the ſcriptures only* were read in certain fixed portions; that when the Hebrew language became unintelligible to the common people, the Greek and Chaldee paraphraſes, or tranſlations, were introduced; and that no diſcourſe was made, except a perſon learned in the law was preſent. It is probable alſo, that their diſcourſes were generally ſhort, and that there were often ſeveral ſpeakers. It is certain, however, that

that they had no proviſion for conſtant and ſet diſcourſes, every Lord's day, and that no ſermons were compoſed for any ſuch purpoſe.

That which was more eſpecially called *preaching the goſpel*, and *preaching Chriſt*, in the firſt ages, was, probably, nothing more than reciting the hiſtory of Chriſt, as of itſelf containing a ſatisfactory proof, that he was a teacher ſent from God. If any Jews were preſent, this hiſtory was compared with the antient prophecies, to prove that he was the promiſed Meſſiah. Our Saviour's diſcourſes were carefully recollected and repeated, as containing the beſt inſtructions and motives to a good life.

When theſe hiſtories of the life of Chriſt, and his diſcourſes, were committed to writing, every chriſtian church conſidered itſelf as in poſſeſſion of the ſubſtance of all the preaching of the apoſtles and evangeliſts; and the reading of theſe writings, called *goſpels*, was a recital of the beſt part of all their ſermons.

When

When the apoſtolical epiſtles were written, and diſperſed, they were conſidered by chriſtians as an additional treaſure of the ſame kind, and, together with the Goſpels and the book of Acts, were imagined to contain a complete ſyſtem of chriſtian faith and duty, that was ſufficiently intelligible in thoſe days, when all perſons were acquainted with the language in which they were written, and with all thoſe alluſions and idioms of ſpeech that puzzle us ſo much in their writings. A mere recital, or at moſt a ſhort expoſition of theſe books, therefore, was deemed ſufficient for all the purpoſes of preaching.

Expounding the ſcriptures ſeems to have been what the apoſtle Paul calls *prophecying*, which, according to his account of it, was calculated for *edification*; and it might have been called prophecying, becauſe it was an exerciſe that thoſe who of old were called *prophets* had been accuſtomed to. We infer from 2 Kings, iv. 13, that it was cuſtomary for the people to reſort to the prophets on the new

moons

moons, and the ſabbath days; probably to hear them read and expound the ſcriptures, which, otherwiſe, every perſon uſed to do in his own family at the ſame times. A number of perſons agreeing to join in this exerciſe, and to ſet apart a place for the purpoſe, was, probably, the origin of ſynagogues among the Jews.

The cuſtom of interpreting the ſcriptures, particularly thoſe of the old teſtament, ſoon degenerated into a moſt extravagant taſte for *allegory*. The plaineſt facts, and moſt ſimple moral inſtructions were ſuppoſed to have a reference to the goſpel. Nay the whole Jewiſh hiſtory was perverted, and, inſtead of being conſidered as a plain narrative of things paſt, was conſtrued to be a dark prophecy of things future. It is no wonder that with the introduction of this taſte preaching began to be more diffuſe, but at the ſame time it was more jejune and trifling. Such were the ſermons of Origen.

When heathen philoſophers and rhetoricians were converted to chriſtianity, they

they introduced their cuſtom of haranguing on particular ſubjects, and particular occaſions, and carefully premeditated or precompoſed their ſermons; ſometimes prefixing to their diſcourſe, a ſhort text of ſcripture, not to paſs at once from the old method of interpreting the ſacred writings, and ſometimes omitting it. In this ſtyle are the ſermons of Chryſoſtom, conſiſting of ſuch kind of eloquence as the Greeks and Romans were fond of diſplaying, in haranguing the populace, and pleading at the bar.

Theſe let diſcourſes were a ſplendid addition to the ſervice of chriſtian ſocieties, and, I doubt not, were much valued and admired; but it was a ſacrificing the genuine ſimplicity of the goſpel and its ordinances, to a taſte for the charms of eloquence, and the refinements of a falſe philoſophy; and in moſt caſes, I doubt not, the plain recital of one of our Saviour's parables would have had a much better effect upon the audience. They would have gone away thinking leſs of the preacher, but more of his ſubject. So

far

far did christian preachers, in those times, depart from the simplicity of the gospel; and so little were they influenced by the spirit of christianity, that, in imitation of the Grecian orators and philosophers, they even hired persons to clap, and express their applause, with violent gestures and vociferations, at proper intervals, on a signal previously concerted between them and the preacher, or his particular friends. It must be observed, that these set harangues were only occasional, and by no means delivered in every christian church every Lord's day. In the dark ages, few persons being qualified to preach, sermons became scarce; and at this day, in the church of Rome, the people meet only to hear prayers and celebrate mass. They have no sermons except in Lent, on certain festivals, and on some other particular occasions.

Sermons revived at the reformation, and particularly the custom of explaining the scriptures, and preaching from particular texts of scripture. Indeed, frequent and set discourses were necessary

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for explaining to the common people the grounds and principles of the reformation; and it was particularly favourable to their purpose, to bring the scriptures into view, and recommend the general reading of them.

At the same time, however, a taste for the Greek and Roman literature happening to revive, the generality of christian preachers, like Chrysostom, forming themselves upon the model of the heathen orators and philosophers, this part of the service came to be particularly attended to, especially as the celebration of the Lord's supper was less frequent than before, and consequently the people were chiefly hearers and spectators, and had little to do themselves in the place of worship. Besides, ministers having had a liberal education, being instructed in the art of oratory, and receiving a stipend for ministerial services, the people in general could have had no idea of their being employed in any other manner, so as to appear to deserve their salaries. Hence the composition and deli-

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very of ſermons came, by degrees, to be conſidered as the chief buſineſs of goſpel miniſters; and while large ſalaries were allowed for this work, in many churches, the people left themſelves wholly unprovided for purpoſes of more importance to their edification as chriſtians.

Thus have we been brought into a ſituation the very reverſe, in many reſpects, of that of the primitive chriſtians; better calculated to diſplay the abilities and addreſs of a public ſpeaker, and to gratify the taſte of our hearers, but by no means ſo well adapted to promote the real improvement of the whole ſociety, as one body.

I am far from denying the utility of preaching, but I would not have it conſidered as the moſt eſſential part of chriſtian worſhip, or indeed as any eſſential part of it. Reading the ſcriptures, praying, and ſinging of pſalms (for which a ſmall ſtock of knowledge is ſufficient) are all that can properly be deemed ne-

cessary. Otherwise, there could be no public worship without men of learning and ability.

The business of preaching, when properly conducted, is certainly very useful, and would perhaps be more useful, if it was not quite so frequent as it is with the generality of Dissenters, and I wish the true art of it was more studied than it is, and that it was conducted with more propriety; but as it generally is, and probably always will be conducted, many inconveniencies attend our placing it in so high a rank of importance.

As the members of our societies assemble chiefly to hear sermons, if the preacher's discourse or delivery be mean, they are chagrined and disappointed, or perhaps leave the society. On the other hand, if the preacher acquit himself to their satisfaction, they are, in general, only entertained, or affected for the time. They leave the place, expressing their admiration of the ingenuity, learning, or eloquence of the preacher, but the dis-

course has produced no other effect. Their diſpoſitions and conduct, are the ſame as before.

Another inconvenience attending the very great eſtimation of ſermons reſpects the preachers. If a miniſter happen not to have popular talents, he is overlooked and deſpiſed, whatever be his real worth, or his abilities in other reſpects. He is then diſcouraged, the generous ardour of his mind is damped, and he is often for ever loſt to ſociety. On the other hand, the applauſe which rhetorical talents, and the graces of a good delivery univerſally meet with, are apt to intoxicate the preacher. From thence it becomes his whole ſtudy to riſe upon his hearers, and ſurpriſe them every time that he exhibits; till, at laſt, he is a mere ſtage player; his geſtures and figures of ſpeech are no longer prompted by his *real feelings*, and the whole ſervice is a piece of artifice, without the exerciſe of the pure devotion of the heart towards God, and without that ſimple and earneſt deſire to inſtruct and amend

others, that ought ſolely to animate the breaſt of the preacher; ſo that whether the preacher acquit himſelf very ill, or, as is generally eſteemed, very well, the conſequence is almoſt equally to be dreaded.

Thoſe diſcourſes, and that manner of addreſs which are really calculated not to procure admiration to the preacher, but which proceed from the heart, and are adapted to make good impreſſions on the heart, and to engage men to form ſteady reſolutions of good living, will not engage the attention of the *many*. This kind of preaching may be compared to the *ſtill ſmall voice*, which few will liſten to, whereas it is ſomething noiſy and bold that the populace will generally run after.

It is much to be regretted, that the cuſtom of *expounding the ſcriptures* is now almoſt univerſally laid aſide among us, and much to be wiſhed that it might be reſumed; but not in the manner in which it was conducted before, as a part

of the ſervice introductory to prayer and preaching, but to ſtand in the place of preaching, all the real uſes of which it is generally well calculated to anſwer. The uſe that was formerly made of this expoſition of the ſcriptures, was the reaſon of its being diſcontinued. The ſervice was long enough without it.

If the cuſtom of expounding the ſcriptures were once more introduced, it would be a means of making our people better acquainted with them; and it is notorious they are every day more neglected; ſo that it is juſtly to be feared, that, in a few generations, our poſterity will have but a very imperfect and indiſtinct idea of the contents of thoſe ſacred books.

As the books of ſcripture contain a hiſtory of all the diſpenſations of God to mankind, a great variety of examples both of virtue and vice, and the progreſs and iſſue of both, the wiſe reflections of good men on a variety of occurrences, together with their medita-

tions and prayers; as they contain all the rules and precepts of a good life, and all the genuine motives to it, delivered with great plainneſs and native energy, I cannot help thinking, that if they were only underſtood, they would, of themſelves, be able *to make us wiſe unto ſalvation*; and that a very ſhort expoſition of them, illuſtrating thoſe paſſages that muſt be really difficult to the unlearned, pointing out the connection of a train of reaſoning, ſhowing the force of an argument, the propriety of a precept, &c. &c. would, in general, be more likely to engage ſuch a kind of attention as would make men think themſelves, and act upon it afterwards, than the beſt ſet declamation upon a particular ſubject. If men will not hear Moſes and the prophets, Chriſt and the apoſtles, that is God himſelf ſpeaking by them, neither will they be perſuaded by any other methods that we can apply.

We have no example of a regular diſcourſe, or a ſet declamation on a particular ſubject, in the hiſtory of our Saviour's

viour's method of teaching. He delivered himself, I doubt not, with great perspicuity, dignity, and energy; but he only discoursed as particular occasions prompted, and, probably, seldom spake for any length of time without interruption, or in a manner that we should now call methodical. The manner of Socrates seems to have been something like it, but not at all that of Plato, or the more pompous and admired of the Greek philosophers and orators.

When the servants of the Jewish rulers, who had been sent to apprehend Jesus, returned, saying, *Never man spake like this man*, it is not to be supposed that their admiration was at all similar to that which would have been excited by what we call a fine, or eloquent speaker; but rather that they were struck with the majesty and authority with which he, at that time more especially, spake; an authority which they had never seen their scribes or pharisees assume, and which no christian preacher ought to assume.

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One reaſon for the peculiar fondneſs for frequent and long ſermons among the old Diſſenters, may be looked for in the times of perſecution. They had then few opportunities of hearing ſermons at all; ſo that they could never think they had enough of them when their places of worſhip were open. For the ſame reaſon they ſeem to have gone to great exceſs in the frequency and the length of all public exerciſes of religion, an exceſs that has had ſeveral bad conſequences.

SECTION VI.

A delineation of a method of church-government.

WHEN what has been advanced under the preceding ſections has been conſidered, I imagine it muſt appear, that the ſtate of our churches requires to be looked into. We have departed very far indeed from the primitive chriſtian plan, and much farther than any regard to the difference between their circumſtances and ours required. We feel the inconveniencies reſulting from it, and cannot but wiſh that they were removed. I ſhall therefore, as one who has had occaſion to think upon the ſubject, and is willing to contribute what may be in his power to the good of the common cauſe, propoſe ſuch a form of church government as I conceive to be the beſt adapted to remedy the evils we labour under; conſidering, in the firſt place, what appears to me the beſt conſtitution of a chriſtian

an church, without any regard to our present customs, habits, and prejudices; and afterwards recommending such forms as may be introduced with more ease, and yet are calculated to answer the principal ends of the ſtricter diſcipline.

In order to do this to the moſt advantage, I ſhall briefly enumerate the wants both of the chriſtian church in general, and of chriſtian ſocieties in particular; obſerving that theſe wants will vary in a courſe of time, and conſequently that the proviſions and regulations adapted to them ſhould vary with them. The apoſtles themſelves made alterations in the conſtitution of the church as new circumſtances aroſe; ſo that we may conclude they would have continued to do ſo had they lived longer, and other circumſtances ariſen. I ſhall therefore take it for granted, that, in re-conſtituting a chriſtian church, we are at liberty to make thoſe variations from the plan of the primitive church, which the very great difference between their times and ours ſhall appear to require. Provided

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we keep in view the original deſign of a chriſtian church, there will be but little danger of falling into any great impropriety; or if this ſhould be done in theory, a little experience will rectify it. It was only worldly views, and a ſpirit of faction, that gave riſe to the ſcandalous corruptions I have recited in the primitive diſcipline.

The ſituation of things is ſuch, as makes it more than ever neceſſary, that the chriſtian church ſhould be furniſhed with *learned men*; by which I do not mean philoſophers, mathematicians, or critics, (though the chriſtian ſcholar ſhould not be deſtitute of a competent knowledge of any branch of liberal ſcience) but men thoroughly acquainted with the language of the ſcriptures, and the hiſtory of primitive times; with the learning, languages, cuſtoms and revolutions of the Jews, and other antient eaſtern nations, and alſo thoſe of the Greeks and Romans; more eſpecially with the antiquities of the chriſtian church, and all the remarkable changes that have

taken

taken place in the world ſince the time of Chriſt, particularly as affecting the ſtate of chriſtianity; that they may be able accurately to trace, in their cauſes and effects, the riſe and progreſs of the corruptions of chriſtianity. They ſhould alſo be well acquainted with the writings and reaſonings of the *modern literati*, on moral and metaphyſical ſubjects, and have carefully read and conſidered all that has been objected to chriſtianity by unbelievers of every claſs.

It is only men thus furniſhed, who can read the ſcriptures with critical ſkill themſelves, or explain them to others; and this learning, by the very deſcription of it, muſt have been unneceſſary in the primitive times; ſince thoſe who were cotemporary with the apoſtles, could not but know their own language and cuſtoms, their own turn of thinking, opinions and prejudices, which we have ſo much trouble to inveſtigate. Chriſtianity was not then corrupted at all, and the objections of unbelievers were few, and ſuch, as it required no reading or ſtudy to anſwer.

To

To acquire this furniture, a liberal and expenſive education is abſolutely neceſſary. In theſe things, mere genius and abilites, without other advantages, will go but a little way. Chriſtians, therefore, if they be wealthy, cannot better conſult the honour of their religion, than by making proviſion for the education of ſuch perſons, and putting it in their power, if they be able and faithful men, to attend to thoſe important ſtudies, without diſtraction.

It would be moſt deſirable, indeed, if men of fortune would themſelves apply to thoſe ſtudies, or educate their ſons ſo as to ſerve the church in this important capacity. But if no perſon will give ſo much of his time, talents, and fortune to the public, numbers ſhould join to defray the expences attending the education of ſuch as have ability and inclination for the work.

As it is not particular *chriſtian churches*, but the *chriſtian cauſe* in general, that requires ſuch men as I have been deſcribing

ing, there is no neceſſity that they be very numerous; though, certainly, the greater number the chriſtian church can boaſt, of men who thoroughly underſtand her principles, conſtitution, writings, and hiſtory, the better.

If we conſider the wants of particular chriſtian ſocieties, we cannot but obſerve, that there ſhould be proviſion in them all, not only for reading and expounding the ſcriptures, and ſinging of pſalms, but alſo for *ſet diſcourſes*, calculated chiefly to inculcate the great practical maxims of the chriſtian religion upon the minds of the people, in order that they may impreſs their hearts and influence their lives. Theſe regular diſcourſes, or ſermons, may certainly be very uſeful, and it is very deſirable that proviſion be made for them in every chriſtian ſociety; though I would not have them conſidered in a light of ſo high importance, as they have gained at preſent. However, ſuch is the cuſtom and taſte of the age, that mere reading the ſcriptures, or a ſhort expoſition of them,

them, will not now be deemed ſufficient for the purpoſe of chriſtian aſſemblies; and ſo far it is certainly right to comply with the eſtabliſhed cuſtom and taſte, and to avail ourſelves of it for good purpoſes.

Among the generality of the Diſſenters, it is alſo, in a manner, neceſſary, that ſome perſon lead their devotions without the help of a preſcribed form of prayer, and that he be able to expreſs himſelf *extempore*, both on the general ſubjects of prayer, and alſo on all the particular occaſions that uſually occur among them. The whole compaſs of prayer is not ſo very large, but that it ſeems to be very poſſible, for a perſon who will properly attend to it, to make himſelf ſo much maſter of it, as to acquit himſelf with ſufficient propriety and fluency in this reſpect; and whenever *extempore* ſpeaking is practicable, it has ſo many advantages above a mere *reciting* of any thing, either from notes, or the memory, particularly in point of juſtneſs

juſtneſs and ſtrength of emphaſis, that it ought, by all means, to be adopted.

But the field for preaching is ſo very large, that, in general, there ſeems to be a neceſſity for the compoſition and recital of ſermons. I cannot conſider any man, whatever be his natural or acquired abilities, as qualified to diſcourſe *extempore*, with ſufficient variety and fluency, ſo as not to give diſguſt to a ſenſible audience, at leaſt, in a courſe of time.

For both theſe purpoſes, *viz.* preaching, and praying, a perſon ſhould not only have had a liberal education, in which particular attention ſhould have been paid to the art of compoſition, but he ſhould have been trained up in the art and habit of public ſpeaking, ſo as to deliver himſelf with diſtinctneſs and good emphaſis, and, in every reſpect, ſo as to convey his meaning with preciſion and energy.

In every thing that has been already

mentioned, some allowance has been made for the difference between the circumstances and established customs of the primitive times and ours; but nothing has taken place that can make us consider the business of friendly advice, admonition, censure, &c. as before explained, to be less necessary in the christian church. It must continue to be necessary while human nature is the same, and the world we live in, the same too; so that its snares and temptations are equally alluring, threatening, and dangerous; because there is the same reason for watchfulness both over ourselves and others.

It is true that vice frequently changes its form. The vices of one age are sometimes extinct in another, and some temptations that have been fatal to virtue, may now no longer exist; but different vices, no less dangerous in their nature and consequences, arise in their place, attended with temptations peculiar to themselves. We are no longer, for instance, in danger of being seduced

into idolatry, in ſacrificing to the heathen Gods, or of apoſtatizing from the profeſſion of religion by the violence of perſecution; but a time of proſperity may, in reality, be more fatal to our virtue; as there is nothing to keep up that attention to our duty, and to rouſe thoſe powers, that are ſure to be awake and vigorous when adverſity calls them forth.

Is not the ſtate of our times ſuch, that youth are even more than ever in danger of running into exceſs? Is not that rage after what we call pleaſure, and that turn for diſſipation, which prevails ſo much at preſent, a dangerous circumſtance for them? Should not, therefore, the vigilance of their parents, aided by that of their friends, and of the church, be employed to prevent them from being enſnared by bad company, and from contracting bad habits, which might end in their utter ruin and deſtruction; being equally fatal to their bodies and their ſouls, their temporal and eternal intereſts?

Is not an inordinate love of gain, and an unchriſtian attachment to the world, the natural conſequence of that ſpirit of trade and commerce which diſtinguiſhes the preſent age? Should not then, a diſpoſition that (unlike the vices of youth) *grows with our growth, and ſtrengthens with our ſtrength*, and even outlives both, be carefully watched? And would not a wiſe man wiſh that other perſons would pay ſome attention to him, in this reſpect, as well as himſelf?

In the midſt of ſo many new ſcenes of buſineſs and pleaſure, that are continually ſoliciting our attention, are we not in danger of loſing that habitual regard to God and his moral government, which is the beſt guardian of our virtue? When God is, as it were, baniſhed from our thoughts, and we can paſs days and weeks without giving any attention to our relation to him, as our creator, preſerver, benefactor, and moral governor, we ſhall certainly be in great danger of loſing our reverence for his authority; and the *fear of God not being before our*

eyes, we ſhall have nothing left to reſtrain us from abandoning ourſelves to any vice or wickedneſs.

Certainly, then, in this ſtate of things, we have as much occaſion as ever for ſome proviſion for admoniſhing us of our duty, and for *eſtabliſhing, ſtrengthening, and ſettling us* in all chriſtian virtues. The truly wiſe will be thankful for ſuch a proviſion, and the fooliſh and profligate certainly ſtand in moſt need of it. They muſt even approve of it, whether, for the preſent, they would like it or not. But this buſineſs of adviſing, admoniſhing, &c. is, as I have largely explained before, of a very different nature from that of preaching or praying. It requires very different talents, and a very different ſituation in the ſociety.

Theſe being the chief wants of a chriſtian church; if I were to give my opinion concerning the beſt method of providing for the ſupply of them, it ſhould be as follows.

Let

Let a chriſtian ſociety, who would *re-conſtitute* themſelves upon a plan as near to the primitive one as their circumſtances will permit, ſet out with, and keep in view, this leading idea, that they aſſociate together for the ſole purpoſe of promoting chriſtian knowledge and practice. Let them conſider themſelves as *citizens of heaven*, travelling through a foreign country, and who mean to give one another all the aſſiſtance in their power to quicken their progreſs, to keep up their attention to their proper country, their home, their deareſt connections, and moſt important intereſts; that, in the language of the ſcriptures, they may be aſſiſted in having *their treaſure, their hearts, and their converſation in heaven.*

To gain theſe ends, let all the members of the ſociety meet, and, in the firſt place, make choice of a perſon to officiate among them as a *public inſtructor.* He muſt be capable of compoſing ſermons, and of leading the devotions of the congregation. If he be ſkilled in chriſtian literature, as it was explained above,

it will be an advantage to them and himſelf, but a great degree of eminence in it is not neceſſary. Theſe objects, however, are very conſiſtent, and if a perſon have had a liberal education, and give his time to his profeſſion, as a chriſtian miniſter, it may well be expected that he be ſufficiently furniſhed for all theſe purpoſes, ſo as to be able to ſerve both his own ſociety, and alſo the cauſe of chriſtianity more at large.

Being provided with a miniſter, corresponding to the office of *biſhop* in the primitive times, let the ſociety, in the next place, chuſe a number of the more elderly, grave, and ſerious perſons, and withall, if poſſible, the more wealthy of their own members, to bear the title and office of *elders*, as explained above. Let every perſon have leave to propoſe, and let the choice be made by lot or ballot. Let there not be fewer than ten or twenty of theſe in a ſociety of three or four hundred.

I mentioned *wealth* as a circumſtance which,

which, other things being nearly the ſame, ſhould be a recommendation to the office of elder, becauſe it will give a man more influence. He will certainly admoniſh with more freedom and authority, when he runs no riſque from the diſpleaſure of the perſon he admoniſhes. He will even be leſs likely to give offence. In every thing relating to ſociety, we muſt go upon the ſuppoſition that we are *men*, as well as chriſtians. Beſides, a regard to wealth is well known to have had weight in the choice of elders in primitive times. Indeed, it is ſufficiently implied by St. Paul, when he ſays, that they ſhould be *given to hoſpitality*.

Let theſe elders, with the miniſter at their head (but with no more power than any other of them) form a *conſiſtory*, and meet about once a month (but to be aſſembled by the miniſter on any other particular occaſion) to conſult together concerning the ſtate of the church, and the beſt method of promoting its real intereſts; but let them have no power

to

to proceed farther than to an admonition, without the consent of the people at large.

Let it be the business of every elder to admonish all the members of the society that live within his district or neighbourhood, of every irregularity, or tendency to it, with prudence and discretion; taking the opinion of his brethren, or of the minister, in difficult cases; let notorious offenders only, and those who have rejected the repeated admonitions of one or more, be proposed to the whole society for public censure; and when a person incurs the last sentence, excommunication, let him not, however, as in the primitive times, be excluded from the benefit of public worship, but let some other method be taken of letting it be known, that he is no member of the society. For this, and other purposes, let a register be kept of all public proceedings. In very difficult cases, let the minister and elders of one church consult with the minister and elders of other churches, and give one another mutual advice.

I ſhould think it advisable, that every member of the ſociety ſhould formally give in his name as ſuch, that it be entered in the public regiſter, and that this act be conſidered by the reſt as an admiſſion to communion with them in the celebration of the Lord's ſupper, and alſo as a promiſe on his ſide, that he will communicate, provided he really believe the rite to be an inſtitution of Chriſt. But let not this, or any other *opinion* exclude a perſon from the benefit of the ſociety, if he be a believer in the chriſtian religion, and profeſs obedience to it, as far as he underſtands it; and let not any perſons, though they be no chriſtians, be at all diſcouraged from attending any religious exerciſes of the ſociety, as often as they pleaſe.

If it ſhould happen that the miniſter be abſent on a Lord's-day, and no other perſon, equally qualified, can be conveniently procured to officiate in his place; and if it be thought that the ſociety would ſuffer by being diſperſed, let one or more of the elders ſupply his place,

by reading the ſcriptures, and diſtinctly pronouncing prayers and diſcourſes, generally approved.

I would adviſe, that, the elders and deacons of a church make uſe of the compoſitions of others, whenever they do any part of the miniſterial duty. It is barely poſſible that perſons who have had no liberal education, ſhould acquit themſelves with propriety and decency, either in prayer or preaching, without that aſſiſtance. It is very poſſible, indeed, that, in their attempts at *extempore* prayer, or preaching, they may pleaſe themſelves, and ſome of the more ignorant of the people; but that ſucceſs is very apt to fill them with vanity and ſelf-conceit, for want of that juſt view of things, and that knowledge of themſelves, which it is hardly poſſible to acquire, without more reading, thinking, and converſing with the world, than generally falls to the ſhare of the private members of chriſtian ſocieties. In this caſe, it is almoſt always found, that the ignorant and conceited are the moſt forward, while the truly

truly modeſt, and beſt qualified, are the moſt backward to ſhow their talents in public; and many are the miſchiefs that I have known this cuſtom to have produced in ſocieties.

There will be a particular propriety in the elders viſiting the ſick and afflicted, as they will generally be their neighbours, and perſons to whom they will be able to unburden their minds, with more freedom than they can to a miniſter.

As to the neceſſary *civil offices* of the ſociety, ſuch as making collections, diſtributing the bread and wine, &c. I imagine that perſons of an age inferior to that of elders, will be the moſt proper to diſcharge them. Let them, however, be young men of ſobriety and good character, bearing the title of *deacons*, and let this office be conſidered as a rank in the church, preparatory to that of elder.

In general, let no elder be under thirty, or perhaps forty, and no deacon under twenty years of age. Let

Let both the elders and deacons be ordained to their office by the prayers of the congregation; and, if it be convenient, let the ministers of other societies be invited to attend and assist.

Lastly, Let this new formed society imitate the primitive christians, and modern Quakers, in attending to the temporal welfare of the members of the society; particularly in encouraging industry, discountenancing idleness and profligacy, and effectually relieving the industrious and helpless poor. For this purpose let collections be made, as in the primitive times, and among the modern Methodists, much more frequently than is usual among us: for by this means greater sums are raised with less difficulty. If it be thought proper, let an institution of later ages be adopted, and *stewards of the public funds* be appointed, who, in their general rules of distribution, shall be governed by the votes of the people.

Such, my Brethren, is the constitution, order,

order, and diſcipline, that I could wiſh, but deſpair ever to ſee eſtabliſhed in chriſtian churches. Were I a member of ſuch a church, I ſhould rejoice in its privileges, and I ſhould dread its cenſures.

If the whole of this ſcheme of church diſcipline cannot be adopted, I ſhould think, however, that there could be no great difficulty in eſtabliſhing a part of it, and ſo much as could not fail of producing very good effects. To make the buſineſs eaſier, let the proper form of ordaining elders and deacons by prayer, be omitted. Only let the miniſter, in concert with thoſe perſons who have the moſt influence in any place, fix upon proper perſons for diſcharging the duty of elders; and when they have agreed to it, let nothing be required of the people but a tacit conſent.

That no unneceſſary alarm be given, let the only object of diſcipline be confined to *advice* and *admonition*; but let the elders make a point of this, that no young people belonging to the ſociety

frequent

frequent bad company, or get bad habits, and grow diſſolute and profligate, without ſome attempt being made to reclaim them; at leaſt by advertiſing their friends of their danger, and engaging thoſe who, on any account, have influence with them, or authority over them, to attend to their conduct, and reſtrain their exceſſes. Let the elders, alſo, ſee that no maſter of a family neglect the moral conduct and religious inſtruction of his children, without ſerious admonition.

Theſe caſes are of infinitely more conſequence than any other that can occur in chriſtian ſocieties, and they are caſes in which a miniſter, ſituated as diſſenting miniſters generally are, can ſeldom interfere to advantage; but in which many other perſons might. If but one young perſon be prevented from becoming abandoned to vice, and loſt to ſociety, and but one maſter of a family be engaged to take proper care of the education of his children, a great and good end will be gained; and theſe things

might

might often be effected, if any perſon made it his *buſineſs* to attend to them, and took proper meaſures for the purpoſe.

When a trial has been made of this looſer form of diſcipline, and the effects of it have been experienced, the ſociety may proceed farther, as they ſhall judge it to be expedient.

SECTION VII.

Objections to this ſcheme of church-diſcipline conſidered, and ſome of its advantages more diſtinctly pointed out.

MANY objections, I doubt not, may be raiſed againſt the ſcheme of church diſcipline I have propoſed; and it is poſſible there may be more weight in ſome of them than I am aware of. At preſent I can only think of three, that deſerve particular notice.

1. Many perſons will be apprehenſive, that

that such church-officers as I have described will be apt to be conceited and arrogant with respect to the people, and to neglect and despise the minister. But I think that any inconvenience of this kind will be sufficiently obviated by providing against the ostentation of their talents in religious exercises, and by appointing a considerable number of persons in each rank. Many ministers, I am persuaded, would have been less incommoded by twenty ruling elders, than they have sometimes been by a single *clerk*, who is no more than the *precentor* in a congregation. Were all source of uneasiness arising from difference of opinion between ministers and people cut off, I should think that nothing of consequence was to be apprehended from the office of elders, as such.

In fact, no inconvenience whatever, arose for many ages from this part of the constitution of the primitive church; but infinite corruptions from the incroachments of the bishops, who, by d sperfing their elders and deacons, to preside in de-

pendent churches, did, in reality, annihilate that order at home, and made them ſubſervient to the extenſion of their authority abroad: and though the elders roſe above their original rank with reſpect to the people, the biſhops roſe in the ſame proportion above them. We may ſee the progreſs of epiſcopal pride and uſurpation in the ſtyle in which the biſhops addreſſed their preſbyters. At firſt they called them *fratres*, *brethren*; but in the third century *filii*, *ſons*.

2. In many of our ſocieties it will not be eaſy to find perſons willing to accept of the office of elder, on account of ſome peculiar ſanctity of character, that is ſuppoſed to be neceſſary to ſupport it.

It muſt be allowed, that the elders in a chriſtian church ſhould be men of the more reſpectable, exemplary, and unexceptionable characters in the ſociety; but if we attend to the deſcription that the apoſtle Paul gives of them, in his epiſtles to Timothy and Titus, I think we need not doubt, but that we may find

a ſufficient number in almoſt any chriſtian ſociety. I ſhall recite all the particulars for that purpoſe.

A biſhop, or elder, Tit. i. 6. muſt be *blameleſs* (ανεγκλητος) but this doth not mean *perfect*; but *free from reproach*, or *ſcandal*; one whom no perſon can juſtly accuſe of any immorality. He muſt be *the husband of one wife*, becauſe polygamy prevailed more or leſs in all countries, at that time. He muſt have *faithful children*; i. e. his children muſt be chriſtians, as well as himſelf, that his whole family might be regular and exemplary; *not accuſed of riot, or unruly, not ſelf-willed, not ſoon angry, not given to wine, no ſtriker, not given to filthy lucre; but a lover of hoſpitality, a lover of good men, ſober, juſt, temperate.* In 1 Tim. iii. 1. the ſame qualifications of an elder are repeated, with the addition of ſome characters more, viz. *no ſtriker, or brawler; that he ſhould rule his own houſe well*, and be *no novice*, or new convert.

Now what idea do all theſe characters

ters give us, but that of a man free from groſs vices, and particularly ſuch as would render him exceedingly diſagreeable in ſociety, and therefore peculiarly unfit to bear rule in it. It is added, indeed, among other properties, that an elder ſhould be *holy* (ὁσιον) but conſidering the reſt of the deſcription, we cannot ſuppoſe it to mean more than *not profane*; for had it conveyed the idea that is now commonly annexed to the term *holy*, it would have been manifeſtly ſuperfluous to admoniſh ſuch a holy perſon, not to be a brawler, quarrelſome, obſtinate, or a drunkard. Strictly ſpeaking, the word that we render *holy*, in the Old Teſtament (the idea belonging to which has been transferred into the New) means *conſecrated, or devoted to God*. In this ſenſe even the garments of the prieſts, as well as all the prieſts themſelves, whatever was their moral character, as alſo the tabernacle, the temple, and the whole Jewiſh nation, are ſaid to be holy. So that, probably, the term holy is applied to an elder, as a perſon

who devotes himself and his time to the service of God, and his church.

It is also added, in Titus i. 9. That he should *hold fast the faithful word, as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort, and to convince gainsayers*; that is, he must be a firm believer in christianity, and well acquainted with the principles of it. Lastly, it is said, that he should be *no novice*, or new convert; lest he be *lift up with pride*, and that he should have *a good report of them that are without*. Very young, or ignorant persons, would be apt to be conceited with such a rank in the church; and if they were not men of a general good character, the reputation of the society would suffer.

Putting the whole together, I do not see that, in any of our societies, we should be at a loss to pitch upon such men as the apostle had in his eye, when he wrote the descriptions above recited.

It cannot be expected that even the

elders of a chriſtian church on earth ſhould be perfect characters. All that is neceſſary is ſuch a ſituation, as will naturally give a man influence in the ſociety, and ſuch a character as will enable him to admoniſh with propriety and good effect, in thoſe caſes in which a perſon would be in danger of incurring the cenſure of the church; and the primitive churches did not take cogniſance, except of ſuch vices and follies as were manifeſtly contrary to ſome known rule of morality, or precept of the goſpel; and ſeldom, or never, except in ſuch caſes as would have brought ſcandal upon the chriſtian name. Any man, therefore, who ſupports what we call *a decent character*, is ſufficiently qualified for the office of elder in a chriſtian church. The exerciſe of his office would continually improve his character, and much good might be done in every ſociety, if all ſuch perſons as have been deſcribed would exert themſelves only ſo much as they clearly might do, without expoſing themſelves to the reproach of *Phyſician heel thyſelf.*

3. It may, perhaps, be objected, that this ſcheme of church diſcipline will confine the attention of the members of particular ſocieties too much to themſelves, and alienate their affections from other chriſtian churches, and from mankind in general. To this I anſwer, that, as far as a cloſer attention to the intereſts of any particular ſociety will ſerve to rouſe a generous emulation, to excell the members of other ſocieties, in chriſtian knowledge and practice, the conſequence is deſirable; and that I ſhould not apprehend that it would, in general, produce any other effect.

The great object that would be continually kept in view, in every ſociety, would be the proper character and views of the members as *chriſtians*, and not as perſons living in a particular town, or aſſembling in a particular place. The preacher who ſhould exhort upon any other principles would not be heard, and the moſt extenſive benevolence could not fail to be every where inculcated; ſo that, not only would the intereſts of particular

ticular ſocieties be more attended to, but the neighbourhood, and the world in general would be gainers by theſe regulations.

Particular chriſtian churches have no intereſts peculiar to themſelves. Every thing they have in view is common to them and all other chriſtians. Beſides, we ſee, in fact, that other ſocieties and combinations of mankind are of great ſervice to one another, when, as in this caſe, there is no competition of intereſt among them. Thus philoſophical ſocieties, and ſocieties for encouraging agriculture, &c. in different places, having the ſame object, have, along with a generous emulation, the ſincereſt friendſhip for one another; and we ſee that philoſophy and agriculture, &c. are gainers by ſuch aſſociations.

Upon the principle of this objection we might, with more reaſon, complain of the connections of private families, as tending to interfere with the intereſts of more extenſive relations; whereas it is known

known that the beſt huſbands, fathers, and maſters, are always the beſt ſubjects, the beſt citizens, and the beſt members of ſociety in all reſpects.

When we conſider the many capital advantages of ſuch a ſcheme of church diſcipline as I have been deſcribing, I cannot but think that all the objections that can be made to it would ſoon vaniſh. For this purpoſe I ſhall, in this place, diſtinctly enumerate the principal of them.

1. The firſt, and capital advantage of this ſcheme of church diſcipline is, that the proper and great ends of a chriſtian ſociety would be effectually anſwered by it; the beſt intereſts of the members of it would be conſulted, and every perſon would be in the way of receiving inſtruction, admonition, reproof, or cenſure, as his circumſtances, his character, and conduct ſhould require.

2. In ſuch a conſtitution of church government, the members of every chriſtian

tian church would look upon themſelves as more cloſely united to one another, by their common relation to the ſame regular ſociety. Having this bond of union frequently in view, they would become attached to one another, and be in a ſituation exceedingly favourable to the increaſe of the genuine principle of brotherly love.

What is it that unites mankind to one another more cloſely, and makes them more diſpoſed to love and aſſiſt one another, than an equal relation to ſome common ſociety, or fraternity; as their being inhabitants of the ſame country, living under the ſame conſtitution, and form of civil government; being of the ſame tribe, the ſame family, and even the ſame occupation, if their intereſts do not thereby interfere. In ſhort, the more things we have in common, the more we conſider others in the ſame light with ourſelves. Beſides, an union in ſociety is an union of intereſt; it is a ſtrengthening of ſome common cauſe, which is a matter of very great conſequence when there are many adverſaries to it. In

In this regularly conſtituted church, therefore, chriſtians would have a new and ſtrong bond of union, of brotherly love, and friendſhip. The members of ſuch a church would conſider themſelves as one body, cloſely united together to promote their common ſalvation, as citizens of heaven. They would mind, *not every man his own things only, but the things of others alſo.* Every individual in the ſociety, like a limb of the body, would have particular attention paid to him, according to his occaſions. They would *exhort one another daily, leſt any ſhould be hardened by the deceitfulneſs of ſin. They would conſider one another, to provoke to love, and to good works. They would not ſuffer ſin in their brethren,* but would continually *ſtudy the things, whereby one might edify another.* The adverſaries of any one member of ſuch a ſociety as this would, for the ſame reaſon, be the adverſaries of all, and all would join to repel the common danger.

2. Had the form of church government that was in uſe among the primi-

tive

tive chriſtians been ſtrictly adhered to, almoſt every corruption of chriſtianity would have been prevented, eſpecially thoſe that were occaſioned by the incroachments of the eccleſiaſtical upon the civil powers. A ſcheme of this kind is ſo far from being favourable to the ambition of prieſts, that wherever it is eſtabliſhed, that exceſſive and ſuperſtitious regard that is paid to the character and office of a miniſter, when he alone engroſſes all the power of a church, and is the only conſpicuous perſon in it, cannot ſubſiſt. The power of the ſociety being divided among a number of perſons, the whole body would be more reſpectable, but any individual would, certainly, be leſs ſo. In a ſociety thus conſtituted, the great object of attention and reſpect would be *the conſiſtory of elders*. The miniſter would only rank as one of them, with that additional reverence, which his learning, abilities, and talents as a ſpeaker would command; and ſince the reſpect that was paid him would depend ſolely on theſe qualifications, he would be the more ſolicitous to improve them. Far

Far better, however, were it for any ſociety, that the power of church diſcipline be lodged in the hands of the miniſter, and he be the only object of reverence, than that there ſhould be no ſuch power in any hands at all. The former of theſe ſituations may be ſaid to approach to *tyranny*, or deſpotiſm; but the latter tends to *anarchy*, and diſſolution.

3. I cannot help thinking but that, if proteſtant churches had all been formed upon this plan, or as near to it as the prejudices of chriſtians would have admitted, it would have been favourable to the progreſs of chriſtian knowledge; and that the remaining corruptions of chriſtian doctrine would have been reformed with more eaſe, and leſs diſturbance in chriſtian ſocieties; at leaſt, in a manner leſs hurtful to the intereſts of vital and practical religion. When every circumſtance is taken into conſideration, I am of opinion, that diſſenting miniſters, inſtead of contriving to aboliſh the forms of church diſcipline, when they found

found themſelves incommoded by them, would have acted more wiſely, if they had endeavoured to make them ſubſervient to their purpoſe; at leaſt, that, if the miniſters had, in ſome places, been the ſufferers, the cauſe of truth would, in general, have been a gainer by this plan. To enable us to judge of this, I ſhall briefly deſcribe what generally happens with us in theſe caſes.

It happens almoſt univerſally, that the miniſter, being the perſon who reads and thinks the moſt in the ſociety, has his mind firſt enlightened. He begins to call in queſtion the truth of thoſe opinions in which he has been educated, and which he has hitherto preached; and in the progreſs of his enquiries, his ſuſpicions are confirmed. If he be a man of integrity, he will always preach at leaſt conſiſtently with his real ſentiments, which are now conſiderably different from thoſe of his hearers; and while ſo much of the buſineſs of the ſociety is in his hands, ſo that himſelf, his performances, and opinions are almoſt continually

tinually in their view, it is impoſſible but that, notwithſtanding all his care, the change in his ſentiments will be perceived. If he be a young man, and zealous for the propagation of new diſcovered truth, he will be apt, of his own accord, and ſometimes unſeaſonably, to obtrude his favourite opinions on his hearers; perhaps even preach on thoſe ſubjects; and in other reſpects he will not always take the moſt prudent methods of propagating truth.

The uſual conſequence of this is, that the congregation, and eſpecially the elder part of them, whoſe prejudices are moſt riveted, take the alarm; while ſome, at leaſt of the younger part of the ſociety, adhere to the miniſter, and adopt his ſentiments. Diſputes unavoidably ariſe, and in the heat of debate, the importance of the opinion contended for is greatly magnified. Be the thing ever ſo trifling in itſelf, the whole of religion will ſoon be made to depend upon it, by thoſe who adhere to the old opinions, while the abettors of the new will plead for moderation. In

In this caſe, if the ſociety be large enough to bear it, they often divide into two; or the miniſter, though every way qualified for the diſcharge of his duty, if he be not abſolutely diſmiſſed, finds himſelf at length under a neceſſity of relinquiſhing his office, and often without any reſource for a maintenance. If he ſtand the oppoſition, great numbers withdraw themſelves, and their ſubſcriptions, and he is often, on many other accounts, rendered miſerable for life; not unfrequently is his life manifeſtly ſhortened by the ſtate of anxiety and diſtreſs in which he is involved; while many of the people are greatly diſſatisfied, and more ſtrongly attached to their old opinions than before.

Too often the miniſter thus circumſtanced, not having the choice of a catechiſm, neglects the catechizing of children, and the inſtruction of youth altogether; and for the ſame reaſon omits other parts of his duty, in which his ſentiments would be more particularly conſpicuous, to the great detriment of practical

practical religion. This situation of things has been peculiarly unfavourable to church discipline, as was explained above. Few, indeed, are the cases, in which, through the prudence of the minister, and a happy concurrence of other circumstances, a congregation of Dissenters gets over this *great crisis*, without any diminution of their strength, or any injury to the interests of real virtue.

On the other hand, in a society governed by elders, single persons, or their opinions, do not make so great a figure, or occasion so great alarm. They are not of so much importance in the society. And in the primitive church, the business of preaching was so inconsiderable, that, provided the usual portion of the scriptures was read in the society, they might be the better content to prefer that interpretation which they liked best.

In this manner, truth might be propagated more silently; and if once the elders, or the majority of them, were convinced,

convinced, there would be leſs difficulty in bringing over the reſt; and the ſociety being very firmly bound together by the forms of church-government, few would think of quitting it; and therefore they would endeavour to make their ſituation in it as eaſy as they could.

Among the Quakers, who have no miniſters ſo conſpicuous as ours, but who are governed, as it were, intirely by elders; differences of opinion occaſion no diſagreeable altercations, or ſchiſms; and there have been, and are, conſiderable differences of opinion among them.

Laſtly, To ſum up what I have advanced, concerning the advantages reſulting from the form of church government I have been recommending. Such a chriſtian church as this would be an intereſting object of attention to all the members of it. It would be a ſociety in which every man would have a certain place and rank, a certain eſtimation and character, and a certain employment. He would conſtantly feel himſelf

ſubject to the friendly inſpection of others, and he would, in his turn, habitually attend to them.

Every officer would vye with the reſt in diligence, in prudence, and in the faithful diſcharge of his duty; and no perſon, or thing, would be overlooked, or neglected, becauſe it would be ſome perſon's known duty to attend to them.

To adopt a deſcription which ſome think, but which I do not think, to have been originally intended for it; ſuch a chriſtian church would be *fair as the moon, clear as the ſun, and terrible as an army with banners.* None but the openly abandoned and profligate, and thoſe who would ſoon be conſidered by the world as ſuch, would cut themſelves off from ſuch a church; and the privileges of it would be courted by all ſerious and thinking perſons, who valued their real improvement, and who had any idea of the ſuperiority of things unſeen and eternal to thoſe of time and ſenſe.

Should

Should any ſociety of rational chriſtians, deſpiſing the inſignificant cenſures of the world, form themſelves upon this model, having no other object than the genuine ſimplicity of chriſtian doctrine, and the native purity of chriſtian manners, they would do themſelves immortal honour. Should their example be generally followed, they might be ſaid, in a manner, to re-chriſtianize the world.

SECTION VIII.

Additional conſiderations in favour of church-diſcipline, as motives *to the eſtabliſhment of it.*

ALL that has been advanced on the ſubject of church diſcipline in this addreſs, may be conſidered as *motives* to the eſtabliſhment of it in chriſtian ſocieties; but there are ſome conſiderations peculiarly adapted to this purpoſe, and which could not have been introduced with advantage in any of the pre-

ceding ſections. I have, therefore, reſerved them for the concluſion of the addreſs.

If we conſider what proviſion is made for the improvement of men's minds in other reſpects, and, more eſpecially, in what manner good diſpoſitions are formed, and mankind are actually trained to virtue, we ſhall find, that, in all caſes, the chief inſtrument is *diſcipline*, or ſomething equivalent to it. In what manner is it that any art, liberal or mechanical, is acquired? It is ſeldom, or never, by inſtruction only, but chiefly by the attention of thoſe who are ſkilled in it to the trials and exerciſes of thoſe who are to be inſtructed. It is well known that without ſome ſuperintendence of this kind, bad habits will inevitably be formed, and the ſcholars will make no true proficiency in any thing. Even ſcience, where practice is not concerned, is never taught to any purpoſe, without frequent and careful examinations, in which actual proofs are given that the principles of it are underſtood,

and

and that progreſs is ready made in the attainment of it.

In what manner is it that children are taught good behaviour, moral or civil, but by what is properly called diſcipline; that is by the authority of a parent, conſtantly attentive to them, and admoniſhing, reproving, correcting, or commending them, as there may be occaſion?

By what means is it that mankind are taught regularity of behaviour, as good citizens, but by a much more rigorous diſcipline? Not only are laws promulgated, but a variety of officers are appointed, to take cognizance of offences; and in every ſtate there are honours and emoluments of various kinds, that may be attained by thoſe who have ability and ſkill to conduct the affairs of the community.

Let us conſider, moreover, in what manner the divine being has made proviſion for the good conduct of his chil-

dren, and ſubjects of mankind in general. Is it not by placing them in a ſtate of moral diſcipline, and ſo conſtituting them and the world, that they cannot but feel the inconvenience of vitious habits and conduct, and find themſelves eaſy and happy in a courſe of virtue? The hand by which they are thus trained and diſciplined is inviſible, but the effects of it are viſible enough; it being evident to every obſerver, that mankind are taught wiſdom and virtue by their feelings and experience more than by inſtruction. It is by the admonitions and reproofs of their conſciences, by the cenſures of the world, and their general condition in it.

In all the voluntary combinations of mankind, that deſerve the name of *ſocieties*, or even of *clubs*, there are rules and orders, officers and penalties, or the ends of the ſociety could not be anſwered, and the community would be diſſolved.

Can it be ſuppoſed then, that, contrary

trary to what we are taught by nature, experience, the conduct of divine providence, and the custom of mankind in all similar cases, that a christian society can flourish, and the great ends of it be secured, without a similar provision? Is the object and end of these associations of less moment, or to be compassed with less attention? In both respects the very reverse is the case. In christian societies the most important instruction is to be communicated, the most excellent maxims of conduct are to be inculcated, and the best habits are to be formed. It is the object of these societies to counteract the strongest influences to which men are exposed through life, namely, temptations to vice and excess from every quarter, and, in the midst of a thousand difficulties and discouragments, to train them up to virtue and immortality.

To gain these great ends, ought we not, if we be wise, to adopt such rules, and such systems, as we see universally adopted in all similar cases, and without which similar ends have never been gained.

ed. Our chriſtian ſocieties, therefore, ſhould be regularly conſtituted; there ſhould be a ſubordination of one to another; there ſhould be the governors and the governed, the maſters and the ſcholars, the fathers and the children; and there ſhould be authority, not *nominal* only, which is all that diſſenting miniſters are now poſſeſſed of, but *real*, as it might be in the hands of perſons more independent of the people. There can be the leſs difficulty in this, when every thing that is called authority in this caſe is of the moſt gentle and ſalutary nature, conſiſting of nothing but inſtruction, friendly admonition, faithful reproof, or juſt cenſure; and when all that any man has to fear, is to loſe his rank and name in the ſociety.

I would add another argument and motive for the regular conſtitution and juſt diſcipline of chriſtian churches, from the authority of the ſcriptures; i. e. of Chriſt and his apoſtles. It is plain that our Lord, when he gave ſuch particular inſtructions how to behave with a refractory offender, in what manner to

admoniſh

admonish and reprove him, in what case his conduct should be reported to the church, and when he should be expelled from it, and considered as *an heathen man and a publican*, took it for granted, that his disciples *would* form themselves into such societies, and that those powers of admonition, censure, and excommunication would be assumed and exercised. We may, therefore, conclude with certainty, that the great lawgiver and judge of christians really meant, that such churches, with such provisions and powers, should be erected; and we ought to consider this as a sufficient authority, and even as equivalent to an express injunction, to form them.

At the first planting of christianity, we find that the apostles actually did introduce this order and discipline wherever they established a christian church. We have in their writings a clear discription of the powers of the officers they appointed in it, and of the nature and conduct of their discipline; and their history affords exmaples of the exercise and use of it.

It

It seems, from some passages in St. Paul's epistles, and is, indeed, probable from the nature of the thing, that while some of the elders of the primitive churches applied themselves chiefly to the business of teaching, others attended to matters of discipline, having a particular talent for it. *Having then*, says he, Rom. xii. 6, &c. *gifts differing, according to the grace that is given to us; whether prophecy, let us prophecy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering. He that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation. He that giveth, let him do it with simplicity;* HE THAT RULETH WITH DILIGENCE. He also mentions *governments*, i. e. probably, the talent of conducting church discipline, among the different powers communicated to the members of the christian church, 1 Cor. xii. 17, &c. *Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. And God hath set some in the church, first of all apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healing, helps,* GOVERNMENTS, *diversities of tongues.*

Now

Now, though it be acknowledged, that the *particular form* of church diſcipline may vary according to circumſtances, yet it cannot follow that, in any circumſtances, it ſhould entirely ceaſe. There ought, therefore, certainly to be ſhepherds *to feed the flock of God*, till Chriſt the *chief ſhepherd* ſhall perſonally appear; and thoſe only can be conſidered as ſhepherds, who are in circumſtances in which they can aſſume the power of ſhepherds, and act as ſuch; which cannot in reaſon be expected of thoſe who are called *miniſters* among the diſſenters.

We find no time in eccleſiaſtical hiſtory in which chriſtian churches were not regularly conſtituted, having, in each of them, a number of *elders*, whoſe buſineſs it more eſpecially was to adviſe and admoniſh the reſt of the ſociety, and in which a perſon was not liable to be excommunicated for ſcandalous immorality. We can trace the *corruptions* of this diſcipline, but the *inſtitution* of it muſt be referred to the times of the apoſtles. The earlieſt and univerſal cuſtom of the church

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is a ſufficient proof of this; and it ſhould ſeem that the ſentiments and practices of the apoſtles, by whatever medium of proof they be aſcertained, ſhould be the rule by which we are to form our own. The ſcriptures themſelves are of no other authority with us, than as they ſupply the beſt arguments of what was taught, eſtabliſhed, or enjoined, by men who were inſpired of God, and therefore not liable to be miſtaken.

Thirdly, to excite us to more attention to this buſineſs of church government and diſcipline, let us conſider the good effects of it where it is, in ſome meaſure, practiſed. In former times, chriſtians of other denominations might have learned the mode and effect of diſcipline from us, but now it is to be looked for any where but among us; and let us not think ourſelves diſgraced by the imitation of any ſect of chriſtians, in a thing that is really uſeful, how deſpicable ſoever their principles or conduct may appear to us in other reſpects.

The Preſbyterians in Scotland are very attentive to matters of diſcipline, and have ſeveral eccleſiaſtical courts, ſubordinate to one another, for that purpoſe. The *ruling elders* aſſiſt the miniſter in overſeeing and correcting the manners of the people, attend upon them in viſiting and catechiſing their diſtricts in the pariſhes, in praying with the ſick, in private admonitions, and at the communion table. In all matters of government and diſcipline they have an equal vote with the miniſters. *Hiſtory of Religion.* Vol. 4, p. 98.

Before every communion, the miniſter viſits and examines every family in his pariſh once, at leaſt, of which notice is given the preceding Lord's-day, that every diſtrict may know when he intends to viſit them. The miniſter, on his viſit, marks, and enters the children in his examination book, if they be fit age. He then exhorts every one to a ſtrict obſervance of their reſpective duties, and particularly to family prayer, reading the ſcriptures, and ſinging of pſalms.

At

At parting, the miniſter uſually prays with every family. Viſitation being over, the miniſter gives notice when he will examine the perſons marked in his book. Every diſtrict comes to church by themſelves, at the time appointed, and the miniſter, accompanied by the elder and deacon of that diſtrict, examines them in the order in which they ſtand in his book. He marks at every perſon's name how they anſwer. Grown perſons, who have been often examined, are not catechiſed, when they are found to be ſufficiently knowing. *Ib.* 101.

Nothing is deemed ſcandalous, or ſubject to church cenſures, but what is accounted ſo by the word of God, or by ſome act, or univerſal cuſtom of the church of Scotland, agreeable thereto, *Ib.* 104. In caſe of drunkenneſs, diſobedience to parents, ſabbath-breaking, ſwearing, curſing, ſcolding, fighting, lying, cheating, or ſtealing, the perſons guilty are ordinarily admoniſhed in private only for the firſt offence; for the ſecond offence they are rebuked by

by the kirk-ſeſſion, and on promiſe of amendment, there they are to ſtop. If no amendment follows, the kirk ſeſſion proceeds to the ſentence of *leſſer excommunication*, under which the perſon is to lie till the amendment appears. If the guilty perſon neglects to take the ſentence off, and relapſes into the vices for which he is cenſured, it may be conſtrued into ſuch a degree of contumacy as may merit the greater excommunication, or the abſolute cutting off from chriſtian communion, a ſentence to be paſſed in a higher court. *Ib.* 107. All the diſſenting congregations in the northern counties of England, and generally in Wales, are conſtituted in the ſame manner as the churches of Scotland; with this advantage, ariſing from their ſituation, that their regulations are purely eccleſiaſtical; no church pretending to a right of interference with another; and no aid of civil power being uſed, or wanted.

It is, in a manner, by the force of diſcipline alone, that the Quakers exceed

almoſt

almoſt all other ſects of chriſtians in an uniform decency and regularity of behaviour. One of the principal uſes of their *monthly meetings*, as deſcribed by George Fox, was, that the poor might be better taken care of, the younger ſort inſtructed, and informed in the way of God, and the looſe and diſorderly reproved, and admoniſhed in the fear of the Lord. *Ib.* 247.

The power and authority exerciſed at thoſe meetings, ſays Mr. Penn, is ſuch as Chriſt has given to his own people to the end of the world, in the perſons of his diſciples; viz. to overſee, exhort, reprove, and, after long ſuffering, and waiting upon the diſobedient and refractory, to diſown them as any more of their communion, or that they will any longer ſtand charged, in the ſight and judgment of God or men, with their converſation or behaviour, until they repent. *Ib.* 250.

The crimes and irregularities which render the Quakers liable either to be admoniſhed,

admoniſhed, or diſowned as brethren, are a neglect of the meetings appointed for the worſhip of God, injuſtice and frauds of all kinds, defamation, breach of the marriage covenant, whoredom, drunkenneſs, gaming, and ſwearing. They alſo ſtrictly admoniſh againſt the unneceſſary frequenting of ale-houſes or taverns, the abuſe of time in diverſions, as cock-fighting, horſe-racing, play-houſes, &c. extravagance in dreſs, and alſo in trade; one brother going to law with another, and other things peculiar to them as Quakers. *Ib.* 254. In all theſe caſes, advice and admonition is given with the greateſt tenderneſs and prudence, and in due gradation. If the offender, after all, prove refractory, and they be obliged to diſown him, they record the ſame, as a teſtimony of their care for the honour of the truth they profeſs. *Ib.* 251.

Among the Methodiſts of Mr. Weſley's denomination, there are what they call *United Societies*, inſtituted, as he ſays, *to watch over one another in love*. For this

purpoſe each ſociety is divided into *claſſes*, according to their places of abode. There are about twelve perſons in every claſs, one of whom is ſtiled the leader. It is his buſineſs to ſee each perſon in his claſs once a week, at the leaſt; to adviſe, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occaſion may require; and to inform the miniſter of any that are ſick, or of any that walk diſorderly, and will not be reproved. *Ib.* 323. After the enumeration of a great number of duties, Mr. Weſley concludes with ſaying, "If there be any among "us who obſerve them not, who habi- "tually break any one of them, let it be "made known unto them that watch "over that ſoul, as they that muſt give "an account. We will admoniſh him "of the error of his ways, we will bear "with him for a ſeaſon; but then, if "he repent not, he hath no more place "among us. We have delivered our "own ſouls." *Ib.* 325.

The Herrn-hutters, or Moravians, ſoon eſtabliſhed among themſelves a ſort of diſcipline, which cloſely unites them to one

one another, divides them into different claſſes, puts them under an intire dependance on their ſuperiors, and confines them to certain exerciſes of devotion. The difference of age, ſex, and the ſituation their members are in with reſpect to matrimony, conſtitute thoſe different claſſes. Each has its director, choſen by its members. Every member is daily viſited by one of his claſs, who gives him exhortation, and makes a report of his conduct to the elders. Frequent particular aſſemblies are held in each claſs, and general ones by the whole ſociety. The overſeers, or leaders, have alſo their private meetings, to inſtruct one another in matters concerning the guidance of ſouls; and they pay uncommon attention to the inſtruction of youth. Beſides thoſe who have the care of orphans, there are others that are intruſted with that of all the other children. *Ib.* 340.

That theſe three laſt mentioned ſects of chriſtians do at all hold together, and that the practical purpoſes of chriſtia-

nity are at all anſwered in them, appears to me to be owing to nothing but their regular forms of diſcipline. Were they reduced to the ſame condition with us, and to have no proviſion except for public inſtruction, they would, I doubt not, decay, and be extinct in a very ſhort time.

That we, who are called *rational diſſenters*, hold together, in our preſent looſe and undiſciplined ſtate, is owing, in part, to our having been a body of conſiderable ſtanding, which gives us ſome of the advantages of an eſtabliſhment, and in ſome meaſure to the connections the diſſenting families have with one another; connections which many perſons do not chuſe to break by leaving us. But this is a tye that has leſs force every day, as indifference to the diſſenting intereſt becomes more general, and deſertions from it become more frequent, and conſequently leſs noticed.

Not a few, I hope, adhere to us from *principle*, but leſs care is continually taken to inſtruct our youth in the true princi-

ples

ples of our diſſent; and ſince the ſubject ſeldom comes in view, in peaceable and quiet times; numbers of the more polite part of our young gentlemen ſee no difference between the ſervice of the church of England and that of the Diſſenters, except ſuch as, to outward appearance, is in favour of the former; and ſeeing it to be, withall, a more faſhionable, ſplendid, and leſs expenſive mode of religion; it is no wonder that many of them, who think and reflect very little, ſecretly incline to it, and are ready to take any favourable opportunity of going over to it; eſpecially as it may be done without any cenſure, and almoſt without notice.

With us a great deal too much depends upon the merit and abilities, or rather the popular talents only, of our miniſters. In theſe circumſtances, it is very little that can be gained, but a great deal that may be loſt; and I believe it is fact, that for one perſon who is brought over to us by the reputation of any good preacher among us, there are ten that leave us through a diſguſt with our bad ones. If the

the very beſt preachers among us, and thoſe who have the moſt popular talents (which are very rare among mankind) barely keep up the numbers of their congregations, for a conſiderable time, they can boaſt what very few can do; and many ſocieties might be named which are dwindling to nothing, under preachers whoſe compoſitions are excellent, and whoſe delivery is much above mediocrity. The temporary increaſe of particular ſocieties in London is only at the expence of others; and this ſhifting from place to place makes it the more eaſy for them to ſhift into the church, or *infidelity* at laſt.

It is certainly much to be regretted, that; with ſo many ſolid advantages as the rational diſſenters, at leaſt, think themſelves poſſeſſed of, with reſpect to the purity of chriſtian faith, and their freedom from the ſuperſtition and enthuſiaſm that diſgrace ſo many other ſects of religion, they ſhould be deſtitute of the common requiſite for the growth, and even the continuance of any ſect or ſociety whatever. But it is no uncommon thing

thing for perſons who are poſſeſſed of ſuperior knowledge to want what is called common ſenſe.

The diſſenting intereſt (beſides its being favourable to civil and religious liberty) can only be truly valuable as the cauſe of truth and virtue, or as far as it is ſubſervient to the genuine purity of chriſtian doctrine and diſcipline. With reſpect to the former, I, as one of the denomination, cannot but think we have great advantages; but with reſpect to the latter, I, though one of them, am ſenſible that we are greatly deficient; and as a friend to the cauſe of truth and liberty, I moſt earneſtly wiſh that ſomething may be thought of, and done, towards ſupplying the defect.

I am afraid that the circumſtances of things among us are not favourable to the introduction of the diſcipline I have been recommending. Indeed, it is almoſt univerſally eaſier to eſtabliſh a new ſociety, than reform an old one, eſpecially one of a long ſtanding. I have not the leaſt doubt, however, but that a true chriſtian church will at length appear, free

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free from all corruptions in doctrine or diſcipline, when its doctrines will be pure, and its diſcipline equally free from rigour on the one hand, and remiſſneſs on the other. I hope that this happy period is advancing apace; and whether any of the forms of chriſtian churches now ſubſiſting will ſerve for a *baſis* of ſuch a church, or not, is of ſmall conſequence. Let the cauſe of truth, of virtue, and of Chriſt prevail, whoever be the inſtruments of it.

In the mean time, let the ſerious members of all chriſtian churches attend to the reformation of them, and attempt every thing that ſhall appear practicable; and if no external reformation be adviſable, let them, however, make the beſt they can of their ſituation. If it would be in vain to attempt the revival of the forms of church diſcipline with us, or, if this be judged inexpedient, let us however, revive the ſpirit of them. Let every member of our ſocieties conſider it as his duty to promote the proper ends of them, and let his ability and opportunity

tunity be conſidered by him as the meaſure of his obligation to exert himſelf. Let us all, without diſtinction, *watch over one another* with a friendly concern, to check every thing that is bad, and promote every thing that is good in one another. Let miniſters imbibe from the ſpirit of their religion, and of their office, that intrepidity and independence of mind, which a regard to their ſituation in other reſpects would not give them. Let them, in the language of St. Paul to Timothy, *give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.* If they cannot both *command*, and *teach*, let them, however, *be examples to believers, in word, in converſation, in charity, in ſpirit, in faith, in purity; that, taking heed to themſelves, and to their doctrine, they may both ſave themſelves, and them that hear them.*

FINIS.

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Preliminary Diſcourſe.—Page 6. line 8th from the bottom, for *by this*, read *of this.*—p. 14. l. 2d. dele *of.*—ibid. l. 10, for *ingenious*, read *ingenuous.*—p. 26. l. 3. from the bottom, for *of* read *as.*

Eſſay.—p. 26. l. 1. for *cenſurers* read *cenſures.*—p. 29. line 1. for *abuſe* read *abuſes.*—p. 61. l. 8. for *of origin* read *origin of.*—p. 112. l. 14. read *do not make.*—p. 117. l. 1. for *ready* read *really.*—p. 125. l. 5. from the bottom, read *of fit age.*